

SUBJECTIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY IN AN 'EXEMPLARY' VIRTUAL TEAM

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by
Andrea Whittle

Department of Human Sciences, Brunel University

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the findings of a 'virtual' ethnography of a 'virtual team' of teleworkers called 'FlexiTeam'. The concept of teleworking refers to workers who use Information and Communication Technologies to work flexibly in time and space. A 'virtual team' is a group of teleworkers organised into a 'team'. There are three substantive findings of this research. First, the discourses of virtual teamwork as 'effortless' and 'flexible' are subject to critique through a description of the forms of labour and (self-)discipline enacted on the part of FlexiTeam members in order to implement 'best practice'. Second, the analysis examines how team members' commitment to this 'best practice' can be understood in relation to their identity at work. This is explored using a theory of subjectivity as constructed through social relationships at work. The analysis focuses on FlexiTeam's social relationship with clients, their employing organisation and within the team.

The client relationship is highlighted in particular because FlexiTeam are interesting in their role as 'teleworking consultants'. FlexiTeam not only *practice* but also *sell* the concepts of teleworking and virtual teams. Unlike existing studies of 'top-down' change imposed by management upon the workforce, FlexiTeam are active in the *production* of the very same discourse they also *consume*. It is argued that this production/consumption relationship constructs a reflexive dynamic for team members' subjectivity, as they strive to be 'experts', 'exemplars' and 'embodiments' of the 'best practice' discourse they sell. However, the third finding suggests that, for some team members, their relationship to the 'best practice' consultancy discourse is characterised less by 'internalisation' and more by ambiguity, ambivalence and instrumentality. This exposes the limits to the 'normalising' power of discourse, even in the case of a team who produce the discourse in question, thereby helping to develop a more sophisticated theory of the subjectivity/discourse relationship.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis is about virtual teamwork. It relates the findings of my ethnographic study of a virtual team called “FlexiTeam”. FlexiTeam are employees in a large UK-based telecommunications firm referred to in this thesis by the pseudonym “TechnoCo”. FlexiTeam is a ‘teleworking consultancy’ group who advise clients on how to implement teleworking and how to manage virtual teams. Team members therefore not only *practice* virtual teamwork but also *sell* related concepts in their consultancy activities. This aspect of their working lives will become an important theme in the story told in this thesis.

‘Virtual teamwork’ is a term used to refer to a team of dispersed workers who use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to work flexibly with regard to time and space. Virtual teams can be seen to involve the union of two organisational trends – virtualisation and teamwork. This introductory chapter shall outline these two trends in order to introduce the reader to the history, nature and significance of virtualisation (1.1) and teamwork (1.2).

The key issue for this thesis arises when the two concepts are united. The question is: how can workers spread *apart* in space work effectively *together* as a team? How this ‘problem’ is addressed by my study is described in section 1.3. Finally, this introduction concludes by offering the reader an outline of the content of the chapters to follow (1.4).

1.1 The Trend Toward Virtualisation

The concept of 'virtual teams' has its roots in a more general trend towards the 'virtualisation' of work and organisations. In terms of the transformations occurring in working patterns, this trend is often labelled 'teleworking'. At the level of changes in organisations, this trend is usually referred to as the 'virtual organisation'. This section shall introduce these terms, outline the evolution of the changes and review the various individual and organisational benefits that commentators claim can be derived from the 'virtualisation' of work and organisations.

1.1.1 What is Teleworking?

Teleworking is understood to be a subset of a wider series of changes towards the virtual or e-organisation. Indeed, the presentations to prospective clients given by FlexiTeam - who themselves promote teleworking (see section 4.1 for an introduction to the team) - depict teleworking as just one of a wider series of changes towards becoming an e-Company. For example, TechnoCo aims to re-engineer itself into an e-Company by making business functions such as training and education, expenses, pay slips, job adverts and recruitment available through the Intranet and Internet from 'anywhere, anytime', in addition to interacting with customers on line through 'e-Commerce'. The focus of this thesis is just one small aspect of the 'virtual organisation' often referred to as 'teleworking'.

The term 'telework' tends to be applied to paid work that is carried out using ICTs (hence the 'tele-' prefix) in spatial and temporal patterns that differ from

conventional working arrangements - where employees commute from their homes to a centralised office. Teleworking is thought to apply mainly to non-manual occupations previously conducted in office environments that do not require the co-location of colleagues or customers. The assumption underlying teleworking is that ICTs can 'bridge the gap' of working at a distance; replacing physical commuting with tele-commuting.

It is often expected that a thesis should begin with a definition of the phenomenon in question. A strict definition would be sensibly needed for the researcher to operationalise the concept: to identify which forms of work arrangement should be selected for study and which should be left out. For example, making 'working from home' the defining attribute of teleworking would necessarily select out from the study mobile workers and satellite office workers.

The first problem with deciding upon a strict definition concerns how the researcher should make valid decisions about what constitutes teleworking. Deciding on how many days per week the individual must be working away from the main office to be counted as 'teleworking' is a fairly arbitrary choice. Indeed, the very presumption of a 'central office' may be misguided where self-employed workers are concerned. Similarly, in the case of FlexiTeam, they do not have a 'main office' and work from a variety of locations including the home office, client sites, company offices and 'on the road'.

Second, defining telework according to the intensity of ICT use and degree of 'virtuality' may also prove misleading. Office workers routinely communicate 'virtually' using the telephone, fax and e-mail, whereas teleworkers may often meet physically for face-to-face contact. The danger is that a technical, *a priori*

definition might leave the researcher with a group of individuals who regard themselves as 'teleworkers' being excluded, whilst including a group who do not readily associate with the term.

Third, the literature on teleworking is also of little assistance in terms of securing a fixed definition. Authors may construct a definition based on technical, geographical, organisational or legal criteria, depending on the focus of their study (Qvortrup, 1998). I am therefore also tempted to conclude, like Qvortrup (1998: 25), "that the term has become as distorted and so lacking in conceptual meaning as to defy serious investigation". Indeed, after over two decades of research it seems less likely than ever that a definitive understanding of teleworking will be achieved.

It would also be expected for an introduction to teleworking to offer the reader some definitive statistics on the proliferation and penetration of teleworking in the workforce. Yet this problem of 'definition' means that different definitions produce different sets of statistics. For example, according to the most *inclusive* definition used by the British Office of National Statistics in 2000, Britain had 1.59 million employed and self-employed teleworkers, accounting for 5.8% of the working population (Office for National Statistics, 2000). Yet by counting only homeworking teleworkers (excluding occasional teleworkers and those working in different places using home as a base) brought the figure down to only 312,000 UK teleworkers: just 1.1% of the working population (ibid). Not surprisingly, different actors who operationalise different definitions fail to produce consistent figures on the prevalence and potential of teleworking.

Nevertheless, the fact that teleworker numbers are now monitored by the Office for National Statistics as part of the Labour Force Survey indicates the prominent status accorded to teleworking by the British government. Indeed, the UK Government are actively encouraging teleworking as part of their UK On-line project (formerly the Information Society Initiative). Teleworking is posited as a benefit for the individual, the organisation and the competitiveness of the British economy as a whole (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000). However, the interpretative orientation of this study is sceptical of the very need to secure a definitive statistic or definition of teleworking. It also retains a sceptical stance toward the many claims made about what teleworking 'is' and 'does'.

Teleworking may well defy serious investigation if the search is for objectivist evidence of revolutionary changes in working practises which can be categorised, counted and then analysed (Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998). Indeed, quantifying teleworking may be a peripheral concern given that the appeal of the concept may well lay not in its proliferation but in its *ideological* power as a 'solution' to numerous social, organisational and environmental 'problems' (Huws, 1991). FlexiTeam are interesting in the sense that they are involved in proliferating and promoting precisely these conceptions of teleworking. This research attempts to maintain an ethnographic commitment to viewing the world as the participants themselves do. I was therefore interested in studying any group who identified with being a 'teleworker' and used this concept to organise their perception of the world. This was certainly the case for FlexiTeam, a team whose very role was 'teleworking consultancy'.

1.1.2 A Brief History of Teleworking

A short history of teleworking is insightful for understanding the social and political processes through which the term entered popular currency. The term teleworking continues to evolve as its use changes. Electronic homework, telecommuting, flexiwork, satellite office workers, nomads, mobile 'road warriors', free agents, telecottage workers are just a few terms which have been used for telework, though obviously they are not all synonymous. Most recently the term e-work is in fashion, no doubt due to the hype surrounding e-commerce and 'dot-com' companies.

Throughout the history of the term, various actors have sought to define telework within specific social, political and economic climates. The term first entered public and academic discourse in 1976 when Nilles et al introduced the notion of 'telecommuting'; the American synonym for telework (Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998). The aim was to offer technologically-supported policy solutions to the economic, environmental and human drawbacks of the commute to work. This aspect was especially pertinent given the attention paid to oil consumption at the time¹. ICTs were valued for their *utility* value in the belief that they could replace the physical commute to work.

The next stage of interest in telework came not from policy but the futurology of Toffler in the 1980's, who popularised the idea of the 'electronic cottage' (ibid). Here for the first time telecommuting was linked to predictions about the birth of the 'Information Society'. ICTs were said to offer a utopian dream comprised of the economic regeneration of rural communities and the social reintegration of

¹ This issue continues to be relevant today and teleworking is still advocated as one means to reduce oil consumption by eliminating commuting journeys.

work, family and community. ICTs were now ascribed a *symbolic value*² and telework became a “highly-charged symbol, embodying for many people their hopes and fears about the future of work” (Huws, 1991: 2).

These idyllic US visions were met with somewhat more scepticism in Europe (Qvortrup, 1998). Critical and feminist analyses highlighted the link between telework and traditional homeworking (ibid). The main groups affected were female office workers who would undertake low paid, unskilled office work from home, often combining it with dependent-care (see for example Huws, 1996; 1997). At the same time surveys and interviews with teleworkers were revealing another side to the utopian dream. Teleworkers were reporting feeling underpaid, insecure, isolated and exploited (Qvortrup, 1998).

In the 1990's telework became associated with a whole host of other business management concepts. The focus on teleworking individuals became eclipsed by discussion of changes in general business policy. Telework was said to be part of wider organisational shifts towards more flexible IT-supported dispersed organisational structures, developed in response to changes in the competitive environment (Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998). The debate was not about teleworking *per se*, but wider concepts such as Business Process Reengineering, the Flexible Firm, Virtual Organisations, entrepreneurship and small firms, teamwork, intra- and inter-firm networks, globalisation, and most recently e-commerce.

² Symbolic value is “value accredited to an artefact, not because of its direct usefulness, but because of its perceived potential to give the owner a means to make his/her dreams and visions come true” (Sturesson, 1998: 321).

1.1.3 The 'Drivers' and 'Benefits' of Teleworking

Teleworking is part of wider discourses about revolutionary changes in society linked to advances in Information and Communication Technology. Teleworking is often presented as an inevitable development of technological progress and 'evolution'. Like other technological developments, the case for organisations to adopt new technologies or ignore them at their peril appears both persuasive and compelling (McLaughlin et al, 2000).

For example, an early research report issued by TechnoCo (reference withheld to protect anonymity) employed an evolutionary metaphor to make the case for teleworking. The report urged the business reader to recognise that, in this 'new era' of international competition, organisations must adapt to embrace teleworking or rapidly become extinct. The report warned that it will be the companies who change first that will prosper. Teleworking was presented as a strategic necessity, as well as a strategic advantage.

Teleworking is seen as one part of a supposedly 'new era' in social and economic life that is variously called the Information Age (Colin, 2000), Knowledge Economy (Neef, 1998), Weightless World (Coyle, 1999) or Network Society (Castells, 1996). This 'revolution' is attributed to ICT, just as the Industrial Revolution is characterised by technological changes in manufacturing and transport (Castells, 1996).

This thesis takes a sceptical stance towards this kind of technological determinism. These accounts implicitly or explicitly ascribe independent influence to technologies as 'agencies of history' which force social change (Bimber, 1990).

As Jackson and van der Wielen (1998) argue, developments such as teleworking should not be viewed as an inevitable consequence of new technologies, nor as the cornerstone of a new (post-) industrial era. Indeed, the fieldwork data presented in this thesis constructs an anti-deterministic argument. By studying a team who are actively involved in the promotion of teleworking (see section 4.1), this thesis argues that technology per se does not drive these changes. Rather, it is FlexiTeam who attempt to define the 'potential' of technology and employ persuasive methods of enrolment to ensure the uptake of teleworking in client organisations.

Regarding these methods of enrolment, one of the great appeals of teleworking may be its flexibility as a concept. Teleworking has been presented as the solution to numerous different 'problems'. How these problems are defined depends on the various political, economic and social contexts of the actors involved, as shown in the history of teleworking outlined above. Teleworking can be seen as attractive to a government seeking to reduce pollution and traffic congestion, to business leaders seeking to reduce the office space costs of the organisation, and to a mother seeking to balance the demands of work and home.

This variety of so-called 'benefits' is not surprisingly employed by FlexiTeam to promote teleworking. The following list of 'benefits' was presented by a team member at an event to promote teleworking (reference withheld to protect anonymity):

1. **Improve work-life balance-** by supporting family friendly working practices.
2. **Increase productivity-** by between 10% and 20%

3. **Reduce pollution and congestion** - by using technology to reduce unnecessary travel
4. **Flexibility**- by using virtual teams to manage peaks and troughs of work
5. **Equal opportunities** - by providing employment to those restricted by traditional working practices
6. **Increase mobility**- by freeing work from the constraints of time and location
7. **Reduce costs**- by improving the use of office space and by reducing absenteeism
8. **Recruitment and retention**- by not restricting our workforce to a particular location
9. **Time management**- by empowering people and offering effective information provision
10. **Closer to the customer**- by spending more time in productive dialogue either face to face or over the phone

(adapted from documentation of FlexiTeam presentation)

This list comprises a persuasive motivation for business managers to implement teleworking, in the hope of realising some if not all of the many benefits listed. What organisation would not want to reduce costs, improve productivity, delight the customer, be environmentally responsible and an employer of choice?

1.2 The Trend Toward Teamwork

The previous section described the rise in prominence of 'teleworking' and the 'virtual organisation'. The teleworkers within these organisations rarely work as atomised individuals within a social vacuum, independent of other people in the organisation. The work that teleworkers perform may well require some form of interpersonal relationships with other workers as part of a social group.

In particular, one form of social group known as a 'team' has increased in prominence on the management agenda in the last few decades. Torrington and Hall (1998: 335) even contend that the 1990s was "the age of the team and

teamwork". This section reviews management literature regarding the 'team' phenomena in order to establish its meaning and significance within contemporary work organisations. To begin with, I will address the question 'what is a team?'

1.2.1 What is a team?

There exists a variety of different definitions in circulation within literature on teams. Again, like in the case of teleworking, the search for a definitive definition appears somewhat elusive and, moreover, misses the insight to be derived from examining the ideological and political significance of the concept. Nevertheless, definitions invariably involve some reference to the following two aspects. First, relationships of interdependence, interaction, communication and collaboration between team members. Second, a common task, goal, vision or purpose towards which the team works. Consider, for example, the following definition:

"We suggest defining a team as 'a group of employees, normally between three and 15 members, who meet with some regularity in order to work *interdependently* on fulfilling a specific *task*.'"

(Mueller, Procter and Buchanan, 2000: 1398-9 emphasis added)

Authors tend to differ on the relative emphasis they place on these two aspects. Compare, for instance, the prominence allocated to the task in this first definition:

"Teams exist for some task-oriented purpose. Orientation to task is what distinguishes teams from other types of small groups."

(Lipnack and Stamps, 2000: 58)

with the unequivocal priority given to the relationships in this second definition:

“A team is easily defined. It is *people doing something together*. ... The *something* that a team does isn’t what makes it a team; the *together* part is.”

(Robbins and Finley, 1998: 10 emphasis in original)

Some authors have attempted to categorise and classify the different types of teams found in organisations. Torrington and Hall (1998) have developed a schema that classifies teams along three dimensions:

1. Time span,
2. Interchangeability,
3. Task and functional range.

Examples of teams that span these dimensions include cross-functional management teams, problem solving teams, departmental teams, production teams and service teams (ibid).

Within management literature, definitions of teams often include some form of advocacy of teamwork, description of the attributes of successful teams, or prescription about how to derive managerial benefits from teamwork. For example, a commonplace definition of a team is a group of workers whose collaboration creates *synergy* – where “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (DeMarco and Lister, 1987: 123). This not only describes what a team *is* but also what a team *does* in terms of the organisational benefits teamwork may produce when it functions effectively.

As Mueller, Procter and Buchanan (2000) suggest, teamwork is perhaps best understood as a concept that arose within a context of specific historical and

social processes. Discussion is therefore required of the traditions and trajectories within which the concept arose.

1.2.2 A Brief History of Teams

Mueller, Procter and Buchanan (2000) describe four reasonably distinct traditions that are drawn on in the current wave of interest in teamwork. The first is socio-technical systems theory, which dates back to the 1950s and the work of the Tavistock Institute researchers, in particular the now famous studies of the introduction of long-wall mining methods (Trist and Bamforth, 1951 cited in Mueller, Procter and Buchanan, 2000). Socio-technical systems theory emphasised the importance of designing a work structure that is appropriate for the social and psychological needs of the employees as well as the task requirements of the existing technology (Glaser, 1992).

The second 'Humanisation of Work' trajectory began in Germany in the late 1970s arising from the work of critical German sociologists and political scientists. The workplace democracy and semi-autonomous teams initiative had only localised impact, to be expanded to widespread diffusion only as a result of the later crisis in productivity in the mid-1980s. The third 'Employee Involvement' trajectory, was evident in the Quality of Working Life (QWL) movement which aimed to involve people in decisions affecting their working lives. This impetus continued into the 1980s and 1990s with the advocacy of new design plants, job enrichment, and multi-skilled self-managing teams.

Finally, the fourth and most recent trajectory, labelled by Mueller, Procter and Buchanan (2000) as the 'Toyotist' trajectory, reflects the significance attributed to

Japanese management methods and 'organisational culture'. Although teamwork was often used only for off-the-production-line problem solving, commentators seized on the use of quality circles, Just-In-Time and lean production techniques in search of the source of Japanese industry's competitive advantage.

From this brief history it is clear that the meaning of the term 'team' cannot be understood outside of the specific economic, social, cultural and symbolic processes that shape its meaning. This thesis places great emphasis upon understanding the context within which the FlexiTeam operates. A section is dedicated to describing the history of the team I studied and how its identity as a 'team' was constructed (see section 4.1). To be clear, FlexiTeam are not part of any broad organisational change toward teamwork in TechnoCo, as per the four traditions described above. FlexiTeam are instead a 'self-defined' team. Nevertheless, they readily identify with many of the definitions of a 'team' described earlier, and subscribe to the beliefs about the numerous 'drivers' and 'benefits' to be derived from teamwork. These drivers and benefits will be reviewed next.

1.2.3 Business Drivers Towards Teams

There is thought to be a number of 'drivers' promoting the use of teams, along with a number of 'benefits' to be derived from their implementation, that together serve to draw organisations and workers toward teamwork. Teamwork is usually placed in textbooks under the remit of Human Resource Management. Humans are seen as a resource to be managed for strategic purposes in a similar way to, say, capital and technology. Indeed, evident within the historical account given above is a trend away from teamwork premised upon *social* rationales toward

definite *business* rationales aimed at securing competitive advantage (Torrington and Hall, 1998). These business drivers shall now be reviewed.

Barker (1999) identifies four main 'drivers' of teamwork and employee participation in general. These are new technology, the globalisation of the economic marketplace, the increasing education level of employees and the growing diversity of the workforce. Management literature that advocates teamwork often employs evolutionary metaphors to encourage its adoption. Organisations are urged to act upon these environmental 'drivers' - before the environment acts upon them - by implementing teamwork. Teamwork is presented as a *necessary* organisational change in the face of competitive pressures, meaning organisations are challenged to 'adapt or die':

"In today's business environment, organisations adapt quickly or die. Gaining competitive advantage in a global environment means continually reshaping the organisation to maximise strengths, address threats, and increase speed. The use of teams has become a common way of doing this."

(Duarte and Snyder, 2001: 3)

Teamwork is presented as not simply a 'one off' change that will result in temporary competitive advantage over competitors. Teamwork is seen as the ultimate *sustainable* advantage.

"Most competitive advantages are increasingly fragile in the intensely competitive, global marketplace. ... Teamwork is an ultimate competitive advantage for it fuels the continuous improvement necessary to adapt and prosper in a turbulent world."

(Tjosvold, 1991: xi)

Management literature therefore appears to put forward a compelling set of business rationales for introducing teamwork. However, such literature often includes a second, if somewhat less prominent, rationale for promoting teamwork. This rationale appeals to social and moral philosophies. These social 'drivers' shall be reviewed next.

1.2.4 Social Drivers Toward Teamwork

Business and social rationales are often found side-by-side in business management literature that advocates teamwork. The latter could be seen as playing an important role in giving a 'human' side to the economic imperatives that shape organisational change. As Tjosvold (1991:101) claims:

“Teamwork melds organizational requirements to be successful and human needs for achievement and solidarity. ... teams give innovation a human face.”

Appeals such as this to 'human needs' or 'human nature' are commonly used to account for the trend towards teamwork. For example, Robbins and Finlay (1998) locate the drive toward teamwork in workers' sense of innate *sociality* – the desire to work in groups as opposed to individually.

“The premise this book takes is that the human race is not a species of individual loners ... We are social creatures. We not only like one another's company, but we seek one another out in one situation after another.”

(ibid: 17)

This appeal to 'human nature' thereby enables the authors to dismiss the suggestion that teamwork is just another managerial 'fad' that will disappear as another 'fashion' increases in popularity.

“Teaming isn’t a newfangled idea, a fad, or an “initiative of the month”. We have always teamed. ... Teaming is in our blood.”

(ibid: 20)

This reasoning leads the authors to posit a number of inherent benefits to be derived from teamwork *for team members*. These include affection, affiliation, acknowledgement and recognition, exchange of ideas and a feeling of personal self-worth (ibid). These benefits are again referred to in the following extract.

“The benefits that come from being part of a strong group cannot be over-estimated. Membership can bring with it a sense of security, of identity and of self-worth. Within the boundaries of a supportive team you can make mistakes, be encouraged, and learn skills that will enhance your life. Some of the greatest privileges of all – those of friendship, of caring and of loving – are to be experienced in the spirit of true teamwork.”

(Cormack, 1987: 7)

Similarly, DeMarco and Lister (1987) suggest that the ultimate sign of a ‘jelled’ team – a team with synergy – is the obvious enjoyment that team members take in their work. Rejection, refusal or resistance to teamwork by employees is therefore presented as “irrational because it violates their essential human needs” (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998: 5). The use of social and moral humanistic claims by such authors constructs a powerful and compelling case for teamwork.

1.2.5 The Enduring Appeal of Teamwork?

Despite such powerful business and social arguments for teamwork, there have been some attempts in recent years to temper the team ‘bandwagon’. Drexler and Forrester (1998) argue that not all forms of task require interdependence and therefore may be more effectively accomplished by individual effort. Doubt has also been cast upon the supposed superiority of ‘intelligence’ achieved by groups

(Senge, 1990 cited in Mueller, Procter, and Buchanan, 2000: 1388). The concept of 'groupthink' – based on classic experimental psychology research - entered the organisational behaviour literature. 'Groupthink' refers to the potential for inferior decision-making in groups with high cohesiveness and high conformity (Manz and Sims, 1982 cited in Glaser, 1992: 403). In their book entitled *Why Teams Don't Work*, Robbins and Finley's (1998) conceded that teams do not always create the organisational bliss managers had hoped for and, furthermore, that people do not always necessarily like being in teams. Yet the authors retained faith in the promise of teams in their subtitle: *What Went Wrong and How to Put it Right*. Indeed, the book carried on to prescribe methods for ensuring positive organisational outcomes from teams.

Notwithstanding recent criticism, the concept of teamwork seems to retain its appeal in part as a result of its underlying moral connotations. Teamwork conjures up images of "collaboration, conviviality, comradeship and commitment to the task in hand" (Mueller, Procter, and Buchanan, 2000: 1388). 'Team' is a powerful metaphor in contemporary society – who does not want to be a team player, or make the team? (Barker, 1999). Indeed, to admit to not being a 'team player' could well result in disqualification from a variety of jobs, ranging from the shop-floor to the managerial board (Mueller, Procter, and Buchanan, 2000). In conclusion, therefore, the concept of 'team' continues to have an enduring moral appeal to businesses and employees alike.

1.3 The 'Problem' of Virtual Teams

The previous two sections have outlined the trends toward 'virtualisation' and 'teams'. The central question for this thesis is: what happens when the two

concepts 'virtual' and 'team' are united? How can workers spread *apart* in space also work *together* as a team? There exists a body of literature that has already posed and attempted to answer this question. This literature is prescriptive in nature and is aimed at practicing managers of virtual teams. This practitioner literature is discussed in more detail in the literature review (section 2.1). What is significant about this practitioner literature is that the question is posed as a managerial *problem*. Virtual teamwork is seen as a fundamentally problematic management issue. This literature attempts to construct instrumentally rational solutions to the problems supposedly generated by managing virtual teams. It aims to guide managers in the effective, efficient and productive implementation of virtual teams by recommending 'best practice'.

This thesis does not, however, seek to contribute to this existing and well-documented body of management knowledge. This thesis adopts an explicitly critical approach to the study of virtual teams (the meaning of 'critical' is explored further in section 2.2.1). It aims to address questions that are not addressed and represent voices that remain silent in the practitioner literature. It employs ethnographic methodology to attempt to move beyond these commonplace manager-oriented accounts of virtual teamwork and construct an alternative account of life as a virtual team member.

In particular, this thesis seeks to advance the debate about virtual teamwork and organisational change in general along three dimensions. First, the thesis addresses a question that has yet to be addressed by the practitioner literature. This literature describes in great detail the practices, processes and procedures recommended for 'best practice' virtual teamwork. However, it fails to adequately address the perspective of the *subjects* of these changes, namely team

members. In particular, the literature is conspicuous in its absence of any analysis the forms of labour and discipline that may be constituted by these changes towards 'best practice' virtual teamwork. This is the first question addressed by this thesis, data pertaining to which is discussed in Chapter 4:

1. What forms of labour and discipline on the part team members may be implied by these cultural changes towards 'best practice' virtual teamwork?

A second question that is also not addressed by the practitioner literature concerns *how* these changes in practice are achieved. It is taken-for-granted that team member's commitment, as opposed to mere consent or compliance, is a pre-requisite for achieving 'best practice' virtual teamwork. Yet the process through which this commitment is engendered is left relatively unexplored. This constitutes the second question addressed by this thesis, explored in Chapter 5:

2. How might team members' subjective consent and commitment to 'best practice' virtual teamwork be secured?

This question is approached through an examination of the relationship between the discourse of 'best practice' virtual teamwork and team members' subjectivity. This draws on a theory of subjectivity as discursively constituted through social relations at work, as discussed in the literature review (see section 2.4 onwards). This study also seeks to contribute to an advancement of this literature by questioning whether the discursive constitution of subjectivity is omnipotent or 'total'. This third question is addressed in Chapter 6:

3. Can the colonisation of team members' subjectivity be considered 'total'?

FlexiTeam can be seen as a 'critical case' for exploring this question because they are involved in the formulation and promotion of the discourse to which they are also subject. It may therefore be anticipated that, as 'embodiments' and 'exemplars' of the discourse they sell, team members' subjectivity might be normalised by their own 'teleworking consultancy' discourse in a 'total' fashion. Yet by arguing that FlexiTeam members' identification with the discourse may not be entirely consistent and complete, even for a team who are active in the production of the discourse they consume, this thesis seeks to contribute to our understanding of subjectivity in organisations. The thesis aims to contribute to the theorisation of subjectivity by elucidating the complexity, ambiguity and indeterminacy of the discourse/subjectivity relationship. My study therefore responds to the concerns of Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 620), who argue that the theorisation of subjectivity would benefit from further research because it is "an important yet still insufficiently explored dimension of organisational control".

The rest of this thesis crystallises around these three central research questions. Before moving on to begin addressing these questions, a brief outline of the chapters is given below.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

The thesis begins in Chapter 2 with a review of existing literature on virtual teams. This practitioner literature recommends a plethora of practices, processes and procedures to ensure the effective implementation of virtual teams. It is argued in this literature that virtual teamwork requires a *cultural* change in the organisation in order to be successful. The literature review then moves on to

consider an alternative, critical body of literature about culture change in organisations. This literature is shown to be insightful for my study of virtual teams as it helps to address my three research questions by considering issues such as discourse, power, control, subjectivity and resistance.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology I used to collect empirical data about FlexiTeam in order to address my three research questions. The discursive perspective developed in the review of critical literature in the previous chapter is further elaborated. The discursive perspective appears to offer a distinctively insightful lens on the issues important in this study – technology, organisation and subjectivity. It is argued that a qualitative, ethnographic methodology is particularly well suited to gathering this type of data. The rest of the chapter discusses the methodological choices and dilemmas I faced with regard to research design, reflexivity and research ethics.

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter of the thesis. It begins with a brief introduction to FlexiTeam before constructing a 'scenario' that presents virtual teamwork as effortless, seamless and flexible. This scenario is used as a contrast with the rest of the chapter. The chapter then aims to address my first research question through a description of the forms of labour and discipline enacted by team members in order to maintain their virtual teamwork arrangement. This includes labour and discipline with regard to the client database, audio-conferences, being contactable, email, phoning, team meetings and travelling. This story stands in direct contrast to the scenario given earlier, and many public accounts of virtual teamwork (including those of FlexiTeam), where virtual teamwork is presented as effortless and flexible.

Chapter 5 expands the analysis by considering the social processes through which team members' commitment to the labour and discipline (described in Chapter 4) is achieved. This chapter therefore seeks to address the second research question. It is suggested that the practices team members engage in can be better understood by exploring the meaning they have for the construction of their identity at work. It is argued that team members' subjectivity is constituted through their social relationships at work. Three relationships in particular are highlighted. Team members are seen to negotiate on a day-to-day basis their identity as a) 'exemplary' with their clients, b) as 'profitable' with their employing company and c) a 'team player' within the team. The labour and discipline described in the previous chapter may therefore be understood as a medium and outcome of the normalised subjectivity constituted through these three social relationships.

Chapter 6 extends the sophistication of the analysis by considering the limits and possible points of resistance to the normalisation of team members' subjectivity. Although the label 'resistance' appears to be inappropriate for categorising the data gathered during this study, examples of dissatisfaction, discontent, disregard, contradiction and cynicism serve to reject the notion that discourse has a 'totalising' effect on team members' subjectivity. The concept of 'career' and 'instrumental commitment' is used to make some sense of the ambiguous and apparently contradictory relationship between the team members and the discourses associated with their current role as teleworking consultants.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by discussing the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It is argued that this thesis comprises an original contribution to the field of 'critical studies of organisations' by exploring

subjectivity in a team who produce the discourse to which they are also subject. Moreover, the findings could be said to contribute to this field by advancing the theorisation of the discourse/subjectivity relationship, by pointing to the indeterminacy and complexity of this relationship. Finally, the implications of my findings for future research with FlexiTeam and research into organisational change in general are considered.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

The subject of this thesis is virtual teams – teams who use Information and Communication Technology to work together while apart. The Introduction summarised the meaning, history and significance of the two concepts ‘virtualisation’ and ‘teams’ (sections 1.1 and 1.2 respectively). This literature review can therefore commence by considering literature that orients to the combination of the concepts ‘virtual’ and ‘team’ as a managerial problem. This literature is aimed at practicing managers and recommends a plethora of ‘best practice’ processes to tackle the ‘problems’ that are understood to occur with the implementation of virtual teams (2.1). This practitioner literature recommends that a comprehensive ‘culture change’ is needed to secure the effective utilisation of the potential benefits of virtual teams.

The following sections of the literature review serve as a critique of this practitioner literature through a review of critical literature on cultural change in organisations. First, the meaning of the term ‘critical’ and the value to be derived from critical analysis is outlined (2.2). Second, critical literature is reviewed for its insight into the forms of labour and discipline that may be ‘hidden’ within popular accounts of virtual teamwork (2.3). This addresses the first research question.

The review then moves on to consider literature that addresses the issue of control and commitment in organisations (2.4). Addressing the second research question, this section involves a consideration of the contested terrain of

'subjectivity'. The next section (2.5) critiques this literature for focussing on 'top-down' models of change and failing to adequately theorise managerial subjectivity. In particular, it is argued that the field may benefit from a robust analysis of the subjectivity/discourse relationship in the case of managers who are active in the *production* of the discourse in question. These criticisms are precisely what my research aims to address.

This theme of critique is extended by reviewing literature that warns against viewing discourse as 'totalising' and highlights the limits of the disciplinary power of organisational discourses (2.6). This addresses the third research question. This leads to a discussion of literature on power and resistance in organisations (2.7). Finally, the concept of 'individualisation' is considered: a recurring theme in the literature reviewed in the chapter (2.8). The chapter ends with a summary of the main arguments and questions that have emerged from this literature review (2.9).

2.1 'Best Practice' Virtual Teamwork

This section reviews literature that tackles the question of what issues arise when the two concepts 'virtual' and 'team' are united, that is – how is the management of *virtual teams* described within existing practitioner literature? The combination of the concepts 'virtual' and 'team' could be seen to imply a form of oxymoron: how do virtual workers spread *apart* using technology work *together* as a team? Indeed, a common theme within business management literature is the construction of this question as a significant managerial *problem*. This section will outline the reasoning behind this problematisation and review the various

'solutions' offered within practitioner literature for the 'best practice' management of virtual teams.

2.1.1 The 'Problem' of Virtual Teams

Jackson (1999) stresses the naivety of the belief that only technical questions require attention in the management of virtual teams. This belief retains an assumption of 'business as usual': that existing management processes are sufficient to manage the change to virtual teams. Yet technology alone is rarely mentioned as a primary factor influencing the degree of business success derived from virtual teams (Duarte and Snyder, 2001). Success or failure is understood to be dependent upon factors other than just technology:

"Leading and working in virtual teams require much more than computers and technology. Success or failure depends on the attainment of competence in, and implementation of, practices that facilitate working effectively virtually."

(ibid: xii)

The literature therefore draws attention to the need for new and reviewed managerial processes, procedures and practices in order to manage virtual teams effectively. It is suggested that the benefits from virtual teams, or indeed any new way of working, will not be realised fully unless a simultaneous change in managerial 'mindset' is also achieved.

"... in order to benefit fully from flexible working, the culture of the organisation and the style and skills of managers need to be prepared for it. Introducing new technology, new facilities and policies for more flexible working will generally achieve very little if the organisation remains wedded to the values, culture and management methods of the past."

(Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000: 79)

Authors often position their books as practical guides offering various 'solutions' to practicing managers faced with the 'problem' of managing a virtual team (see for example Haywood, 1998; Duarte and Snyder, 2001, Lipnack and Stamps, 1997, 2000). Indeed, a number of academics and consultants – including the team at the centre of this thesis – base their livelihoods on the premise that managers require not only guidance on technological issues but also advice regarding the *management* of virtual teams. Managers are advised not to 'muddle through' on their own but rather to seek to implement 'best practice' as prescribed by the various advocates of virtual teams (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997; Haywood, 1998).

For example, Lipnack and Stamps (2000) contend that managing a virtual team is inherently more problematic than managing a co-located team. They present the reader with a caution that

“A virtual team must be smarter than a collocated team – just to survive.”
(ibid: 211)

The reader is assured that the book contains plenty of advice about how to create a 'smart' virtual team. However, the particular managerial issues highlighted by different books depend to a large extent upon the definitions of virtual teams that are deployed. For example, one definition concentrates upon the phenomenon of global, international virtual teams within trans-national corporations. This definition lends itself to a focus upon 'problems' arising from cross-cultural issues (Duarte and Snyder, 2001). In contrast, authors who are more interested in the phenomenon of inter-organisational networking stress the difficulties of boundary-spanning between organisations (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). Again, authors deploying the term 'virtual team' to refer to short-term, project-based grouping

within an organisation (Wellins, Byham and Dixon, 1994: 343) tend to focus on issues regarding how to secure commitment and motivation from employees who are simultaneously members of many virtual teams.

This thesis shall concentrate upon literature that pertains to the group in question. FlexiTeam are a long-term, well-established team of employees of the same organisation, geographically distributed across the UK. The following sections review some of the 'best practice' prescription offered within the literature regarding the management of this particular type of virtual team.

2.1.2 Communication

Virtual teamwork is understood in the practitioner literature to present a 'communication problem'. This derives from the way in which teams are represented as a set of social relationships generated by the cumulative effects of interaction.

“Over time, relationships develop among people in a group because of their interactions with one another, eventually enabling them to become a team.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 103)

According to this reasoning, a team is only a team by virtue of its ongoing intra-team communication. In particular, the form of informal and social communication that tends to occur in office environments “at the copying machine or at lunchtime” (Britton et al, 1999: 5) is most often highlighted due to the positive effects such communication is thought to have on the “feeling of solidarity with one’s colleagues” (NUTEK, 1997: 239) and “cohesion and team spirit” (NUTEK,

1998: 66). Because virtual teams do not have the 'luxury' of constant face-to-face contact enjoyed by co-located teams, the practitioner literature draws attention to communication as a significant issue concerning virtual teams. This is translated into a managerial problem because it is suggested that 'team unity' is linked to productivity and performance:

"Because face-to-face contact is not part of everyday life in virtual teams, unity may be more difficult to attain and manage. It is possible to be productive without having the feeling of being a team, and it is possible to feel a sense of unity without being productive. In the long run, many of our most satisfying experiences are in teams that balance task performance and social dynamics. The dynamics work together to create the team experience. Both are necessary for effectiveness."

(Duarte and Snyder, 2001: 180-1)

Duarte and Snyder (2001) argue that management has traditionally tended to evaluate teams on the basis of their performance outcomes (ibid: 228). Yet the authors recommend that – because *social dynamics* are so important to virtual teams - managers of virtual teams should also evaluate teams on the quality of their interactions and the enduring relationships among members (ibid). Indeed, the first 'myth of virtual teaming' these authors seek to dispel is the notion that virtual team members can be 'left alone' (ibid: 74). On the contrary, communication is posited as a necessity for team-building between dispersed workers. The 'solution' they propose involves the carefully managed use of a range of ICTs for communication at a distance. The desired outcome is a reconciliation of the paradox of feeling 'together' while 'apart':

"The goal of well-managed social dynamics is a feeling of team unity."

(ibid: 180)

The practitioner literature suggests that issues such as communication, which may have been taken for granted in the conventional office environment, should be treated more explicitly in a remote working situation (Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2001: 95). Managers are advised to ensure that regular communication is occurring between virtual team members (ibid). In order to be effective as a virtual team, team members are urged to employ a multiplicity of technologies to link intentionally, copiously and variously (Duarte and Snyder, 2001). For example, managers are advised to encourage members to utilise the telephone in particular, with the inclusion of some social content as well as business content (ibid).

Furthermore, the practitioner literature suggests that the use of ICT-mediated communication in virtual teams brings about the need for new communication-related behaviours on the part of team members (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). Duarte and Snyder (2001) recommend that a developing team should review their norms of behaviour and establish a new set of social etiquette in order to communicate effectively using ICTs, such as audio-conferencing and email (Duarte and Snyder, 2001). They suggest that keeping in regular touch with other team members should be part of the 'team norms' (ibid). These norms could also include the imperative to check your voice mail every day and return calls within 24 hours (ibid). Similarly, regarding email, team members are advised to send messages only to those who need to be included and to be cautious and thoughtful when tagging messages as 'urgent' (ibid). New behaviours are also thought to be required for audio-conferencing to be effective, implying an increased level of effort and discipline on the part of virtual team members:

“The minimum standard of structure and preparation required for an effective voice conference is much greater than a face-to-face meeting. Co-located teams may be able to get away with casual or sloppy meeting management practices; distributed teams don’t have that luxury.”

(Haywood, 1998: 49)

This emphasis on the use of ICTs for maintaining communication at a distance does not imply that face-to-face meetings are seen as redundant. On the contrary, the practitioner literature in fact stresses the importance of meeting in person for teams that are virtual.

“We feel it is important to note that too much use of technology can isolate people from colleagues ... steps should be taken to ensure teams continue to meet together face-to-face.”

(Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000: 95)

Fisher and Fisher (2001: 120) suggest that this advice is indeed preferred by practicing managers: “a clear majority of those who work in virtual settings strongly advocate having some face-to-face time.” Haywood (1998: 78) argues that meetings are so highly valued by practicing managers because “there’s very little doubt that face-to-face meetings are one of the best and quickest way to build relationships.” Lipnack and Stamps (1997: 139) concur, suggesting that in spite of their additional cost, practicing managers still uphold the value of holding face-to-face meetings:

“Some managers regard the community-building aspects of such meetings as so important that they insist on them in spite of tight budgets. As we inaugurate the age of virtual teams, such meetings become all the more important. Most of the people whom we interviewed for this book stressed the importance of face-to-face interaction to solidify virtual teams.”

This resonates with the definitions outlined in the Introduction (1.2), which tended to emphasise two defining aspects of a ‘team’: shared tasks and social

relationships. If social relationships are seen as fundamental to successful virtual teamwork, and face-to-face meetings are seen as essential for developing relationships, there is little wonder why bringing team members physically together is given *increased* emphasis within the practitioner literature.

2.1.3 Knowledge Sharing

The previous section reviewed practitioner literature that stressed the importance of communication for team-building purposes. Another issue highlighted within the practitioner literature is the distinct but related concept of 'knowledge sharing'. Although obviously relying upon the social relationships constructed between dispersed team members, and the communication links between them, the focus here is more upon the 'problem' of how to ensure effective knowledge transfer within a team that cannot rely entirely on face-to-face communication.

Knowledge sharing is understood to be critical for the success of teams where members' cooperative input into a shared product or service is thought to be what differentiate teams from a group of independent individuals. In fact, Drexler and Forrester (1998) argue that any team with a low interdependency level and without shared tasks does not warrant the label "team", a term frequently overused. They argue that the superior performance achieved through team 'synergy' can only be achieved if members communicate effectively and share their knowledge towards the attainment of their shared goal.

Knowledge sharing is considered to be of particular importance in teams where members are seen as 'experts' in their own right. Such cross-functional teams are said to bring together members with a range of different skills and knowledge to

work cooperatively on a shared project. The skills required of the members is understood to emerge naturally from the task requirements faced by the team:

“Specified tasks require specific expertise. ... People ... come together with the hope that by combining efforts they can achieve great results. To get to results, they naturally divide the work into tasks that require people with specific skills, capabilities, and experiences. People with needed expertise and knowledge have power to the degree to which the work requires them. ... Everyone on a virtual team is or should be expert in something needed for the group to accomplish its work.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 73-4)

Duarte and Snyder (2001) use the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle to describe the process by which these ‘experts’ are united by virtual teamwork. When the pieces are scattered across time and space, communication brings them together to generate a superior understanding of the problem and complete the ‘jigsaw’.

“The complexities of tasks in virtual teams warrant utilising all members to understand the whole... When every team member has a piece of the puzzle, robust communication pulls the pieces together and plays a key part in solving problems.”

(Duarte and Snyder, 2001: 208-9)

With team members in different places, the practitioner literature sees virtual teams as having a distance problem to solve (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). Although virtual teams cannot rely on the ability to communicate face-to-face on an everyday basis, the literature points to a range of ICTs that are understood to support knowledge sharing amongst distributed members. Alongside the telephone, email and audio-conferencing lies computer software that uses Internet and Intranet technology to store information that can be accessed and updated by any remote user with access rights. Haywood (1998) argues that

these systems enable virtual teams to build 'knowledge repositories' that store the 'corporate memory' of the group.

The practitioner literature stresses that purchasing and implementing such systems should not be the only concerns of the virtual team manager. First, managers are advised to deal with the practical matter of integration.

"For virtual teams, integration is a practical matter. It arises both in the technologies the team chooses to support its functioning and in the technologies it uses to generate its work product. Will our applications work together? Can we link to the corporate networks? Can we connect remotely? These are key pragmatic issues that virtual teams must resolve."

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 181)

Second, it is suggested that team members should adhere to group norms regarding knowledge sharing. Duarte and Snyder (2001) recommend that managers engineer an 'organisational culture' that supports knowledge sharing by constructing norms regarding the free flow of information. These norms are thought to thereafter guide the behaviour of team members. Lipnack and Stamps (1997) argue that these norms compel team members to assess the appropriateness of the information they are storing and to ensure that it is accessible to others. The authors also stress the importance of team members sharing common views about what information goes where and when. They describe a case study where the virtual team members were expected to keep one another informed about projects, literature, exhibitions, suppliers and contracts that had relevance to the team's primary task.

In accordance with the prescription offered in the previous section, virtual teams are also advised to ensure sufficient *face-to-face* communication for knowledge

sharing purposes (NUTEK, 1997; Forseback, 1995). This advice arises from the notion that ICT-mediated communication alone is insufficient for the successful transfer of knowledge, in particular 'tacit' knowledge (Roberts, 2000). However, the practitioner literature also points to a further factor that is thought to be critical for the effectiveness of knowledge sharing in virtual teams. Whereas *individual* reward systems are thought to encourage competition, with its adverse effect on information sharing, forms of *team based* reward and recognition are presented as crucial to securing effective co-operation in virtual teams. The issues regarding of reward and recognition systems, and more generally questions concerning managerial control, are discussed in the next section.

2.1.4 Managerial Control

A common theme within the practitioner literature regards the so-called 'problem' of managerial control. Haywood (1998), who like FlexiTeam, offers consultancy services to managers of virtual teams, acknowledges in the preface of his book that the most common questions he is asked by clients are 'how do I know my team members are really working?' and 'how do I know they are working on the right thing?' Managers are reported to be concerned that team members' motivation will lower when they work at a distance, work performance will suffer and the worker will deviate from the work goals set up (Forseback, 1995).

The practitioner literature focuses on two aspects of this 'problem' of managerial control. First, as described above, managers are clearly keen to ensure the effective managerial discipline of individual distance workers. Second, regarding virtual *teams* more specifically, managers are also concerned that reward systems should encourage co-operative teamwork behaviour, as opposed to

individualistic and competitive actions that deviate from the team's overall objectives. These two parts shall be addressed in turn.

a) Managing Virtual Workers

Virtual working is thought to present a challenge to traditional forms of management control and monitoring employed in the workplace. During industrialisation, home and work were separated in the belief that labour discipline was more satisfactorily maintained if workers were under one roof (Giddens, 1995). This 'surveillance' configuration was designed precisely to render workers 'manageable' and is associated with the construction of the very activity of 'management' itself (ibid).

Virtual working is thought to challenge this form of managerial control because workers are no longer physically visible to management. For example, when employees work from home or 'on the road', measures of 'input' such as time spent at work, is often no longer available as a signal of worker commitment. The practitioner literature suggests that these new 'virtual' forms of work demand new forms of management control techniques based on results (Forseback, 1995; Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000; Duarte and Snyder, 2001). A move from an *observational* model to an *output-oriented* model is advocated by the authors of the many 'how to' books and articles (Fireman, 1998). Managers are advised to adapt their control mechanisms to measure employee outputs (such as productivity and performance) instead of inputs (such as time spent at work).

This output-oriented model involves the principle of 'management by objectives'. Here, employees are assessed on the basis of their performance against a series

of targets or objectives, reviewed on a regular basis, and often linked to an associated system of remuneration. 'Managing by objectives' requires that managers set clear performance targets and give their virtual employees regular feedback on performance (Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000). 'Managing by objectives' is thought to ensure that, firstly, virtual workers are working while 'out of sight', and secondly, are working on the tasks required by management (Haywood, 1998). In short, objectives are thought to ensure effective 'discipline at a distance'. As Fisher and Fisher (2001: 61) argue:

"Goals and measurement are especially important to leaders who must coach from a distance. Metrics are almost like a virtual manager that keeps everyone focussed on the most important priorities. They are always there, whether the coach [manager] is physically present or not."

Nevertheless, when virtual workers are part of a virtual *team*, it is suggested that the target and reward system should be further adapted to reflect and encourage this team focus. Fisher and Fisher (2001: 74) argue that a "primary challenge of the distance manager is building cohesion in a team separated by time, space and culture." They further state that cooperative working is more difficult to achieve in virtual teams than in co-located teams. The 'problem' of how to encourage 'teamwork' shall now be discussed.

b) Managing Virtual *Teams*

Literature on teams has for a long time advocated the use of joint reward systems for encouraging cooperative work (cf Tjosvold, 1991). Cooperative work is seen as important because it is understood to create the synergistic results that make teams out-perform groups of competitive or independent individuals (Tjosvold, 1991). Duarte and Snyder (2001) therefore advise that, in the light of changes

toward virtual teamwork, systems that reward individuals should be enhanced by including rewards for the performance of the team as a whole.

Indeed, Lipnack and Stamps (1997) argue that individual goals and rewards are inappropriate for virtual teams since they tend to encourage competitive behaviour. Competitive behaviour is thought to discourage team members from sharing information, finding the best path for producing results cooperatively, and helping and encouraging others. This form of behaviour is seen as antithetical to the requirements for success in virtual teams.

“... Since sharing information is the lifeblood of a virtual team, competition within hinders or scuttles success. ... Group tasks promote *cooperation* that is strengthened by joint rewards. When they are in the mode of cooperation, people assume that everything is fair and that they will be rewarded accordingly. They pool their talents, offering and using individual skills and competencies as needed by the tasks.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 148 emphasis in original)

In short, team goals and rewards are thought to encourage members to act in the best interests of the team, as opposed to acting in self-interest. This is seen as especially important for virtual teams, who do not physically work together and cannot rely on the supposedly “team-building” quality of co-location.

The desired outcome of team reward systems in virtual teams is therefore cooperation, which is associated in the literature with a plethora of benefits for both team members and (‘most importantly’) the organisation:

“Cooperation generates positive feelings of family and community as people share and integrate information. ... Performing tasks and reaching goals cooperatively bring the added benefits of helping others, feeling good, and storing goodwill for the future. Cooperation spurs the sharing of

information and increases the insights available for planning, problem solving, and executing. People who work cooperatively are confident of success and believe that others want them to do well. They have more fun, which translates into more positive feelings about work. Most importantly, a wide range of studies over all age groups shows that cooperation results in higher productivity than competition or independent work.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 148-9)

The cooperative virtual teamwork that arises from team goal and reward systems is presented here as beneficial to both management and team members themselves. From a managerial perspective, team members are thought to be encouraged to ‘do things right’ (act cooperatively in the best interest of the group as a whole) and ‘do the right thing’ (work towards the tasks set by management). From the perspective of team members, they are said to enjoy all the benefits of support, sociality, community and cooperation from being part of a virtual team.

Underlying both the move toward ‘management by objectives’ and team-based rewards is an organisational theory concerning ‘trust’. The issue of ‘trust’ is the focus of the following section.

2.1.5 Trust

The previous section consisted of discussion concerning the ‘problem of managerial control’. In effect, the discussion suggested a reverse of traditional assumptions about ‘control’. In place of the strict mechanisms of control within the workplace, managers were advised to adopt a more ‘hands off’ managerial style based on ‘trust’. In addition to the employee-manager relationship, the emphasis on teamwork suggested a need for trust between team members in order for cooperation to occur effectively. This section reviews practitioner literature that advocates the importance of ‘trust’ for virtual teams.

The concern about 'trust' within virtual organisations dates back to Handy's (1995) influential article "Trust and the Virtual Organisation". Handy (1995: 87) argues that

"If we are to enjoy the efficiencies and other benefits of the virtual organisation, we will have to rediscover how to run organisations based more on trust than control."

Since the publication of this article, a number of books and articles have identified the problem of 'trust' as the most difficult issue associated with distributed teams (Haywood, 1998). Within the practitioner literature, trust is seen as both under threat within virtual teams (Handy, 1995; Nandhakumar, 1999), and also the very substance that holds virtual teams together (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997, 2000; Duarte and Snyder, 2001; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998). Trust is thought to be difficult to establish in virtual teams because team members may lack a shared social context (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998). Yet trust is also seen as the very substance they holds virtual teams together in the absence of co-location and presence-based control systems. This discussion shall therefore focus on the recommendations given to managers within the practitioner literature regarding the creation and maintenance of trust within virtual teams.

First, trust is seen as important for maintaining an effective manager-employee relationship when working at a distance (Fisher and Fisher, 2001). It is recommended that managers turn conventional 'command and control' thinking on its head (Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000). This advice rests on the premise that workers perform better when they are respected, trusted and motivated (ibid). Fisher and Fisher (2001: 91) contend that it is rare to find

employees “who excel under the punitive thumb” of a manager who does not trust them. They go on to warn that, where the requisite level of trust is lacking, working outside of conventional office arrangements is likely to be problematic for both manager and employee (see also Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000).

Second, trust is seen within the practitioner literature as an important team-wide attribute for maintaining effective working relationships between dispersed team members.

“Without trust, building a true team is almost impossible.”

(Duarte and Snyder, 2001: 139)

“Trust is the elixir of group life. ... Trust is the all-purpose grease for the ongoing hard work of the team.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 224-5)

Duarte and Snyder (2000) attempt to dispel the myth that building trust is relatively unimportant in the case of virtual teamwork. The authors place such emphasis upon the concept of trust that they dedicate an entire chapter of their book to the subject. This chapter not only stresses the importance of trust, it also offers practical tools for helping managers to assess and improve the ‘trust’ within their virtual teams. This includes a ‘checklist of trust behaviours’ to observe in team members, a ‘trust log’ to keep track of behaviours that build trust, a ‘trust audit chart’ to assess the trust levels of the team, and a ‘trust radius questionnaire’ to define the scope of trust required by the team.

In a similar vein, Lipnack and Stamps (2000) conclude that trust is the one word that captures the essence of successful virtual team collaboration. They advise managers of virtual teams to pay special attention to building trust at each stage of the team’s development. The authors present a three-part framework of trust.

First, team members are advised to demonstrate their performance and competence in order to be trusted by the team. Second, team members are advised to demonstrate integrity through the alignment of their actions with their stated values. Third, team members are advised to demonstrate a concern for the well-being of others in the team. As the authors' earlier book definitively states:

"In the networks and virtual teams of the Information Age, trust is a "need to have" quality in productive relationships."

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 225, emphasis in original)

Thus, in summary, the practitioner literature advises managers of virtual teams to change the teams' communication practices, knowledge sharing practices, control and reward mechanisms and instil trust into their relationships in order to achieve 'best practice' virtual teamwork. The practitioner literature contends that only through implementing the 'best practice' it recommends will managers secure 'success' from virtual teams.

2.1.6 Virtual Teamwork as Culture Change

The changes constituted by this 'best practice' include changes to communication patterns, knowledge sharing practices, managerial control strategies, reward and recognition systems, and trust relations. The scope and depth of these changes seem to penetrate the fundamental managerial beliefs, values and norms of the organisation. It appears that the move toward virtual teams advocated in the practitioner literature involves not only changes in technology but also changes in *organisational culture*.

Indeed, *The Complete Guide to Flexible Working* makes explicit the need for new ways of working to be introduced alongside more fundamental cultural

developments in order to deliver their full range of benefits (Toshiba and HOP Associates, 2000). An incompatible or outdated organisational culture is seen as the main obstacle to introducing innovative working practices in organisations (ibid). Culture change, in line with the 'best practice' recommendations described above, is presented as essential for the 'success' of virtual teamwork.

To be sure, many organisations might either dispute that these changes in fact constitute a 'culture change', disagree with or disregard the prescription offered in the practitioner literature, or perhaps even reject virtual teamwork altogether as a necessary or desirable change. It must also be acknowledged that the practitioner literature on virtual teamwork is neither as pervasive, coherent and convincing as the more popular accounts of culture change (such as Peters and Waterman, 1982). Certainly, on the basis of the literature reviewed here, the reader may well *not* regard this prescription as a "culture change program".

Yet, in the context of this study, in attempting to maintain an ethnographic commitment to seeing the world as the participants do, it is clear that FlexiTeam explicitly view the consultancy advice they offer as "culture change" (see section 4.1.3 for more detail). This consultancy advice draws heavily on and is largely in accordance with the practitioner literature reviewed in this section. Furthermore, the concern of this thesis is not with generating any definitive understanding of how virtual teamwork should be managed, that is, whether or not teleworking should involve 'culture change' and what the content of this culture change should be. Rather the concern is to generate an understanding of what the discourse of virtual teamwork – as it is variously manifested – 'does', that is, what are its social effects?

One such social effect of these 'best practice' changes that is important to consider, whether they are regarded as 'cultural' or not, is the effects on team members themselves. The voice of team members is largely absent from the practitioner literature, with its concern the managerial problems and benefits associated with virtual teamwork. Yet the experience of the team members is also implicated in this cultural change, as suggested in the following quotation:

"The ways in which virtual team members identify with one another, share power, communicate and build trust are important in achieving team results and in the subjective experience of being a team member."

(Lipnack and Stamps, 2000: 139)

The practitioner literature appears therefore to have a 'missing subject' – the team member - that is briefly touched on in the above quotation. The next section reviews an alternative critical body of literature that helps to bring into focus the subjective experience of virtual teaming.

2.2 A Critical Perspective on Virtual Teams

The previous section reviewed literature that posed many questions regarding virtual teams and offered a multitude of potential answers. However, the questions were posed from the perspective of managers in search of solutions to the managerial 'problems' supposedly created by virtual teams. Many issues – such as what forms of labour and discipline might be implicated in the changes, how commitment to the required changes might be secured, and whether the forms of subjectivity generated could be described as 'totalised' – failed to be problematised by this literature. These three questions drive the discussion of literature in the rest of this chapter:

1. What forms of labour and discipline on the part team members may be implied by these cultural changes towards 'best practice' virtual teamwork?
2. How might team members' subjective consent and commitment to 'best practice' virtual teamwork be secured?
3. Can this colonisation of team members' subjectivity be considered 'total'?

Addressing these questions requires a review of literature that extends beyond 'virtual teamwork' to explore what insights can be derived from critical studies of a range of organisational changes, such as teamwork, BPR, TQM and so on. It is suggested that the theoretical and empirical findings of such literature may be used to inform my study of virtual teams. In sum, such literature aims to provide a critique of the underlying assumptions about instrumental-rationality, objectivity and neutrality that is taken-for-granted in mainstream business management literature. Yet before embarking upon a comprehensive review of critical literature, it is perhaps worthwhile reflecting on the purpose and value of sociological critique, as employed in this thesis.

2.2.1 Why Critique?

The term 'critical' is used in this thesis to refer to a perspective that goes beyond managerial literature to open organisational phenomenon to sociological question and critical reflection. The perspective taken in this thesis does not as such strictly adhere to 'Critical Theory', following the Frankfurt school. The critique offered in this thesis does not extend its questioning as per Critical Theory to include suggestions for alternative, more enlightened forms ways of acting (see Alvesson and Willmott (1996) for an overview of the insights of Critical Theory in

relation to management). Nor does it draw from feminist theory, also with its political, emancipatory intentions. There is therefore no explicit 'political project' underpinning the analysis presented in this thesis. Nevertheless, it is argued that there is still value and insight to be derived from the particular 'critical' perspective developed in this thesis. This section aims to outline these insights.

The merit of a critical perspective literature can begin to be appreciated when contrasted with mainstream management literature. The latter often presents management as a politically neutral and virtuous activity, that is, beneficial for the employee and other stakeholders as well as the employing organisation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Managers themselves are represented as carriers of rationality and initiative (ibid). Management is understood to follow the logic of instrumental rationality: the search of the most effective 'means' (such as the division of labour, organisational structure, job design etc) for achieving the specified 'ends' (that is, the realisation of surplus value in the pursuit of private profit, in the case of commercial organisations).

Yet there is a growing body of literature that attends to management as a social phenomenon that merits serious critical examination – that is, which not only considers the means-ends relationship (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). The dominance of instrumental-rationality tends to lead to a narrow preoccupation with a limited set of ideas presumed to be manageable and directly related to effectiveness (Alvesson, 1993). However, as Alvesson and Willmott (1992) argue, management is too potent in its effects on the lives of employees (and other social actors) to be guided by narrow, instrumental forms of rationality alone.

Indeed, given that a large proportion of our adult lives tend to be spent working in organisations, it may be useful to look at how changes in management practice affect us on a social level (Barker, 1999). Stories describing the (positive and negative) social consequences of everyday work life within organisations comprise a welcome complement to management literature concerning the quantitative benefits and productivity gains of managerial practices (ibid). It has been suggested that the positive and negative features of organisations can be better appreciated through a rich, complex and holistic understanding of the workplace (Alvesson, 1993), not simply through statistics concerning productivity gains.

In addition, a critical perspective shows that decisions about means and ends that guide management literature are not value-neutral (Thompson and McHugh, 1990). The representation of management as a neutral, technical business disguises and simultaneously legitimises the deep-rooted values concerning order and control in industrial societies (Gowler and Legge, 1983). Management is a social practice that is derived from the historical and cultural relations of power (such as capitalism and patriarchy) that both enable and impede its development (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Within mainstream management literature, many features of organisational life – such as inequality, conflict, domination, subordination and manipulation – are ignored in favour of behavioural questions concerning efficiency or motivation (Thompson and McHugh, 1990). On the contrary, from a critical perspective, rationality and efficiency are seen as ideological constructs that can help to legitimise the positions, rewards and activities of dominant groups (ibid). All too often, supposedly ‘new’ managerial ideas are preoccupied with preserving

established priorities and privileges, such as managerial rule and profitable growth (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

A critical perspective is better placed to highlight the political, cultural and ideological effects of management practices (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). A critical perspective has the ability to take seriously issues such as power, politics, control and resistance; issues that are often sidelined in management-oriented literature. This literature also frequently contains assumptions about the universal and timeless nature of its prescription. In contrast, critical literature can offer a historically and contextually situated analysis, focussing on the various meanings, implications, origins and stakeholders of contemporary management phenomenon (Storey, 1995).

Furthermore, a critical perspective is able to question the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying much management prescription. Claims that management research is simply a matter of applying positivistic techniques to grasp and manipulate an objective reality are seen as intellectually deficient (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). For example, a critical perspective may question the taken-for-granted assumption that 'organisational culture' is a variable that can be manipulated by management as a means to control employee behaviour (Alvesson, 1993). This idea is explored further in section 2.6 below.

Finally, critical research has the ability to interrogate the way that management constructs are often mystified by denying or naturalising the social processes of their construction (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Critical research can demonstrate how ideas, values and understandings that are generally thought of as natural are socially constructed and therefore susceptible to change

(Alvesson, 1993). It is in this sense that my study can offer the potential for developing forms of 'micro-emancipation' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), albeit without any specific pre-determined logic or politic. My analysis argues that the arrangement of virtual teamwork is not natural or inevitable; thereby opening up the possibility of seeing how it 'could be otherwise'.

Having discussed the meaning and value of critical research, this chapter can now proceed to establish what specific insights might be derived from an application of a critical perspective to the phenomenon called 'virtual teams'. First, an answer to question 1 (posed at the beginning of this section) requires an appreciation of what forms of labour and discipline may be implicated in the prescription regarding 'best practice' virtual teaming.

2.3 The Labour and Discipline of Virtual Teamwork

The practitioner literature on 'virtual teams' (2.1) detailed the prescription offered to managers regarding the successful management of virtual teams. The 'object' of much of this prescription was the team members themselves. For example, it was advised that team members should communicate regularly using a range of ICTs (according to team norms), share their knowledge with others, work hard at building trust, be a team player by striving to meet shared targets and so on.

Following a more critical reflection of this prescription, it appears to constitute a substantial amount of *labour* (additional worker effort) and *discipline* (adherence to regulation of behaviour) on the part of team members. Moreover, this labour and discipline is certainly not inconsequential. The practitioner literature proposes a clear causal link between the implementation 'best practice' and the 'success'

of virtual teams. Should team members cease to perform such labour (such as returning phone calls) and remain disciplined in their conduct (such as limiting the number of emails they send), virtual teamwork would presumably cease to be successful.

Yet the perspective of these 'labouring subjects', the very people who are thought to sustain the virtual team arrangement, is generally sidelined within the practitioner literature. It is assumed that the new working practices required by the culture change will naturally be welcomed and enthusiastically applied by the team members. In this respect, management literature could be seen to involve a 'missing subject'. My thesis aims to place the 'subject' centre-stage, and explore the social consequences of virtual teamwork. One such consequence could be the forms of labour and discipline on the part of team members implicated but unacknowledged within the 'best practice' literature. This is the first research question:

1. What forms of labour and discipline on the part team members may be implied by these cultural changes towards 'best practice' virtual teamwork?

This section therefore aims to review critical literature that establishes the theoretical grounding for my analysis of the first research question.

Forms of control such as Tayloristic methods of production have been heavily criticised for the effects their work rhythms have upon the labouring body. More recently, the focus of such labour process studies has moved to investigate the dynamics of labour and worker discipline within the non-manual workforce (see

for example Sturdy, Knights and Willmott, 1992). Forms of managerial change initiative (such as computerisation, JIT, TQM, BPR, teamwork etc) also have consequences for the working patterns of the white-collar workforce upon which they are targeted. Yet the practitioner literature reviewed above (2.1) displayed a tendency to marginalize, disregard or dispute such issues, presenting virtual teamwork as naturally beneficial for both the organisation *and* its members.

The literature on the 'virtualisation' of organisations (1.1) suggested that teleworking could reduce the employee's workload (by reducing commuting time), enable new forms of flexibility (through discretion to work where and when you want) and improve work-life balance. These benefits were presented as the essential *attributes* of the technology and the inevitable and desirable *effects* of ('correctly') implementing teleworking. This form of essentialism and determinism regarding technology has been subject to a series of critiques within a field known as 'Science and Technology Studies' (see 3.1.2 for more discussion). Although authors within this tradition use a variety of methods and perspectives, they share in common an aim to develop alternative sociological understandings of the development and use of science and technology (see for example, Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Suchman, 1987). It may therefore be useful to explore the insights offered by this body of literature with respect to my study of virtual teams.

STS is critical of essentialist and deterministic accounts of technology. In the case of virtual teams, this might involve taking issue with the assumption present in management literature that technology enables teleworking to be both an *effortless* and *flexible* form of working arrangement. It appears paradoxical to suggest that virtual teamwork could involve forms of *labour* (as opposed to reducing work effort) and forms of *discipline* (as opposed to greater flexibility).

However, adopting a critical perspective enables us to ask precisely those questions that are omitted, dismissed or taken-for-granted within the practitioner literature. The question is therefore: what forms of labour and discipline might be implicated in the change to being a 'best practice' virtual team?

Schwartz, Nardi and Whittaker (1999) addressed a similar question in their ethnographic study of 'virtual workers'. The authors show how the additional work effort pushed onto individuals through the new 'virtual' way of working – such as learning new technology, keeping 'plugged in' to your interpersonal network and managing boundaries – is 'hidden' within public accounts that advocate virtual working. Such 'deletion' functions to hide the cost and burden of virtualisation. By presenting concepts such as 'team' and 'communication' as 'back-boxed' – the given, known, unproblematic and stable starting point of productive work – these accounts ignore the ongoing labour, strategies, techniques and social practices that are employed to sustain the continual construction and reconstruction of collaborative virtual work.

The additional labour and discipline implicated in virtual work is also becoming recognised within mainstream practitioner literature. The latest publication of Gil Gordon (2001), the US telecommuting 'expert', is entitled *Turn It Off – How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office without Disconnecting Your Career*. Gordon describes the tendency for virtual working to entail intensified forms of labour and discipline, such as extended working hours, answering calls at any time of day or night, taking work on holiday, and so on. Yet Gordon lays the 'blame' for these practices firmly at the door of the technology that 'enabled' the 'anytime-anywhere office'. The book takes the form of a 'self-help' guide, recommending personal strategies for managing time-boundaries. Instead of

critically interrogating the more fundamental forms of managerial prerogative that helped to construct the experience of work intensification, Gordon appears to individualise the responsibility by suggesting teleworkers themselves self-discipline their working relationships³. This theme of individualisation is explored in more depth later in this chapter (section 2.8).

The critical perspective advanced in this thesis takes seriously issues of how virtual teamwork constructs both positive, negative and ambiguous work experiences for team members. Another important aspect of the experience of virtual teamwork concerns how the 'management control' of team members might be achieved. How might managers ensure that team members perform the correct forms of labour and discipline implied in the 'best practice' virtual teaming prescription? In other words, how is the consent and commitment to the culture change secured from team members? This attends to my second question and is examined in relation to existing literature in the next section.

2.4 Subjectivity and Control in Organisations

The 'problem of managerial control' is a long-standing issue within both management studies and industrial sociology, albeit addressed in distinct ways by the two fields of enquiry. Within both perspectives it is recognised that employing organisations are fundamentally dependent upon a form of consent to the exercise of productive work on the part of the workforce.

³ For a critique of the role of self-help or 'How To' books in constituting subjectivity, see Garsten and Grey (1997).

At the heart of the 'problem of control' is what Townley (1994) terms the 'indeterminacy of contract'. Employers are greatly concerned to close the gap between the capacity to work and its exercise (ibid). Put another way, employers are interested in minimising the difference between workers' labour power and their actual labour (Sewell, 1998). In short, management is centrally concerned with obtaining desired work behaviours from employees (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2000). This is because even the most mundane of managerial techniques requires the cooperation of the workers they aim to control.

This 'problem of control' has been traditionally addressed through mechanisms such as the structural division of labour, the fragmentation of tasks, an explicit system of rules, strict supervision and surveillance of work tasks, union negotiations regarding the wage-effort relation, and the threat of negative sanctions such as termination of employment. These and similar techniques are focussed upon control of human behaviour and have been termed 'direct control' (Friedman, 1989).

In contrast, more recent forms of management control techniques have tended to embrace a 'new philosophy' that differs from the mechanisms of direct control. The linguistic metaphors employed in describing the employment relation have moved from concepts such as supervision to trust, alienation to participation, rigidity to flexibility, hierarchy to teamwork, compliance to commitment (Keenoy, 1997). As we saw in the practitioner literature (2.1), these changes are understood to comprise a 'culture change' that involves a radical departure from the outdated and incompatible philosophies of traditional styles of management. Trust and power/control are conceptualised polarised alternatives, the former being the advocated position (Knights et al, 2001).

The notion of 'culture change' was first popularised by Peters and Waterman's (1982) highly influential book *In Search of Excellence*. Culture change programs do indeed appear to involve a qualitative shift in management focus. Instead of focusing on traditional management concepts such as strategy and structure, tasks, rules and rational decision-making, 'culture' penetrates the moral dimensions of organisational life – the sphere of right and wrong, good and bad (Guest, 1992). In this respect, culture change involves dabbling in those aspects of social life that are normally the domain of religious institutions (Watson, 1994).

Culture change is commonly understood to be liberating because the aim is no longer to regulate tasks, giving employees a level of responsibility and autonomy over work (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2000). The focus is shifted to the regulation of the employee's self, as opposed to the work they are engaged in (ibid). The desired performance of work is assumed to follow by default if the employee's self is effectively colonised. An elaborate system of rules, characteristic of bureaucracies, is thought to be no longer required where organisational norms are internalised by members of the organisation (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992).

Culture change in fact sets itself the more ambitious task of engineering not just reluctant compliance but willing consent and commitment (Legge, 1994). The aim is to capture the 'hearts and minds' of employees, thereby managing what they think and feel, not just how they behave (Willmott, 1993). Culture change can thus be seen to have a normalising and self-disciplining effect upon employees (Sakolovsky, 1992). Employees are understood to act in the best interests of the organisation not because they are physically coerced, but because they are

driven by a strong commitment to and identification with company goals (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2000).

The regulation of the 'self' therefore appears to be an important aspect of contemporary organisational life and thus a pressing agenda for research, especially of a critical kind. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 621) argue, the issue of 'identity' is

“a significant, neglected and increasingly important modality of organisational control.”

There exists a growing body of literature that critically interrogates the role of the 'self' in 'cultural change' programs in organisations. This literature critically examines the consequences of the move from regulating the behavioural patterns of workers and the physical movements of the body towards the regulation of what is variously referred to as the worker's 'soul' (Rose, 1999; Ackers and Preston, 1997), 'psyche' (Sakolosky, 1992), 'identity' (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Watson, 1994; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Barker, 1999) or more commonly 'subjectivity' (Smith, Knights and Willmott, 1991; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000; Casey, 1995; Ball and Wilson, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 1999, 2000, 2000a; Willmott, 1993; Ezzy, 1997; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Townley, 1994; Deetz, 1992, 1998).

An analysis of subjectivity therefore appears to be important for developing an understanding of how employees position themselves in relation to culture change programs. This enables the researcher to move beyond the declared ambitions of culture change programs to investigate the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of their implementation. For example, Wilkinson and Willmott

(1995) were able to explore how employees responded to the contradictions between the concepts of 'trust' and 'participation' espoused in Total Quality Management, and the experience of job insecurity and an intensification in the pace and pressures of work.

Subjectivity therefore emerges as an important part of any critical consideration of cultural control in organisations. Deetz (1992: 27) even suggests that "the most significant product of any corporation is its members". Indeed, O'Doherty and Willmott (2000) argue that critical research can only be advanced if it addresses the contested terrain of subjectivity. Accordingly, this study attempts to analyse the role of subjectivity in the processes of securing commitment to the 'best practice' virtual teamwork recommended in the practitioner literature (2.1).

The term 'subjectivity' refers to a person's ability to construct his or her self-identity in the context of social or 'discursive' constraints (Grugulis and Knights, 2000). The 'subject' is a philosophical term for what in lay terms might be called the 'person' or 'human being', or what psychology refers to as 'the individual' (Henriques et al, 1998). However the term 'subjectivity' is used in a manner distinct from the meaning of the 'individual' in psychology (ibid; Knights and Morgan, 1991). Critical approaches question the essentialist and humanist assumptions regarding the 'sovereign' subject in psychological theories (Henriques et al, 1998). These emphasise the authentic, rational, unitary, and agential capacity of the self (ibid). A critical approach to subjectivity does not presume a pre-given agent with a stable existence prior to the social relations in which he or she is enmeshed (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). Critical approaches instead contend that the social or 'discursive' constitutes the subject

(Casey, 1995). Subjects do not exist prior to their implication within *discourse* (Knights and Morgan, 1991).

A 'discourse' can be conceived as "a set of ideas and practices which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomenon" (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 253). Discourses are embedded in social practices that reproduce ways of seeing as the 'truth' of the discourse. As Watson (1997: 142) argues:

"Cultures 'operate' discursively; they both 'offer to' people and 'impose on' them sets of concepts, expressions, terms and statements which frame 'reality'."

In this respect, the body of knowledge constituted by the 'best practice' virtual teamwork literature (see section 2.1) can be seen as a discourse. Teleworking is certainly not of the same scale, scope and significance as the other discourses of organisational change commonly studied by scholars (e.g. TQM, BPR, teamwork, excellence etc.). Teleworking may have a relatively high profile in TechnoCo, due in no small part to the actions of FlexiTeam in the 'Work-anywhere' program, but the same cannot be said of organisations across the board. Indeed, FlexiTeam's central challenge is to encourage client organisations to place teleworking higher on their agenda.

Yet nonetheless the *pertinence* of the discourses of teleworking and virtual teams to FlexiTeam cannot be understated. Teleworking consultancy is the central role of FlexiTeam. Teleworking is therefore not only what they practice but also what they sell. As such it appears to constitute an important discourse in the ordering of team members' lives. It could further be argued that the 'best practice' virtual teamwork discourse embodies particular ways of seeing teams and the subjects

that comprise them. Hence, an important aspect of the discourse might be that it has disciplinary power with regard to team members' subjectivity.

Subjectivity therefore refers to self-awareness and self-identity – the condition of being a subject - but always as an open, reflexive, situated, dynamic, multiple, problematic and contested construction (Henriques et al, 1998). The subject is also always positioned in relation to and produced by various discourses – the condition of being subject (ibid). This dialectic interaction between 'being a subject' and 'being subject to' is important. As Ezzy (2001) explains:

“We define ourselves, our identity, through relations to others. ... The self is found in both creativity and originality, *and* in self-definition through dialogue and systems of significance that are given external to the individual, that is, socially.”

(p. 640 emphasis added)

This implies that the self is not simply colonised by discourse in a deterministic manner. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 628) argue:

“Employees are not passive receptacles or carriers of discourses but, instead, more or less actively and critically interpret and enact them”

Viewing the self as both the product of discourse *and* an active producer and manipulator of discourse is significant because it

“allows us the possibility of personal and social change through our capacity to identify, understand and resist the discourses that we are also subject to.”

(Burr, 1995: 153)

The issue of resistance is explored further later (2.7). The point here is that to separate the 'individual' and the 'social' is thus to miss this inter-relationship between self and society. The subject cannot be separated from its context because we can only make sense of ourselves as subjects in terms of social relations (Knights and McCabe, 1999). Furthermore, the discourse used to characterise 'the subject' can be seen as constitutive of the object it seeks to describe. For example, Burr (1995) describes how the very concepts "I" and "me", particularly as used within Western linguistic grammar, allow us to foster the belief that we are autonomous individuals that are responsible for our actions. Agency, then, does not describe an attribute of individuals but is itself a discourse through which we make sense of and ascribe 'intentionality' to others and ourselves.

Rejecting the notion of the 'individual' as an essential and autonomous entity in favour of a theory of subjectivity as discursively constructed has implications for how the 'worker' is conceptualised in empirical studies of work organisations. For example, O'Doherty and Willmott's (2000) critique and re-interpretation of Sosteric's (1996) ethnography of Canadian nightclub workers demonstrates how an orthodox labour process analysis fails to sufficiently understand the role of subjectivity in the organisation of work.

O'Doherty and Willmott (2000) criticise the theorisation of employee subjectivity during what Sosteric interprets as a change from 'responsible autonomy' towards the imposition of 'direct control' by management. Sosteric's represents employees during the 'responsible autonomy' phase as having the ability to express their essential, independent and authentic 'personality'. This interpretation is criticised for failing to recognise the contingent and discursively

constructed nature of subjectivity. O'Doherty and Willmott argue that the nightclub employees did not simply 'bring their identity to work', only to be repressed and alienated by the imposition of 'direct control'. Rather, employees actively negotiated their self-identity through their social relations with colleagues, customers and management. Indeed, forms of surveillance and discipline were evident even during the so-called 'responsible autonomy' phase, such as peer surveillance during the informal 'after-work' gatherings of co-workers.

This critique of the notion of that power/control and trust/empowerment are mutually exclusive, antithetical managerial choices is also a feature of other critical studies. Ethnographic research, such as that of Barker (1999), Sewell (1998), and Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) are significant in exposing the power, control and surveillance at work in organisations that have implemented cultural change, such as teamwork. For example, Barker (1999) argues that, contrary to the notion that teamwork involves conceding managerial control, teamwork constructs an even more powerful and complete form of control as team members are constantly under the 'eye of the norm' of peer surveillance. Far from lifting or diluting management control, cultural change can promote its extension, although in a somewhat less obtrusive but more insidious form (Willmott, 1993; Jermier, 1998). These critical analyses of cultural change are significant in going beyond managerial rhetoric about trust, empowerment and teamwork to expose the forms of surveillance, power and control at work.

However, existing literature tends to focus on subjectivity at the 'shop-floor' level. It could be argued that the body of critical literature might benefit from a more thorough exploration of *managerial* subjectivity. In particular, the development of theory of subjectivity could benefit from an exploration of the subjectivity

constructed by those who not only consume but also *produce* the discourse in question. This issue shall be discussed in the next section (2.5). It has also been argued that the theorisation of subjectivity can be made more sophisticated by rejecting 'discourse determinism' and exploring the forms of power and resistance at work in organisations. This literature is explored in the following section (2.6).

2.5 Managerial Subjectivity

O'Doherty and Willmott (2000) extend their critique by re-interpreting Sosteric's (1996) analysis of the role of managers. Sosteric characterises management as the 'agents of capital' who hierarchically imposed their 'direct control' framework over those with less power. O'Doherty and Willmott argue that Sosteric again fails to appreciate fully the role of subjectivity in organisations. They offer an alternative, more sophisticated reading of Sosteric's data by suggesting that, in moving toward more authoritarian forms of control, the managers may have been reacting to the threat posed by the increasing numbers of customer complaints to their own self-identity as competent and professional managers.

This suggests that an important development in critical studies of work is the analysis of *managerial* work. Indeed, one area that is relatively under-developed within the critical literature is the analysis of managerial subjectivity. One particular area that is promising in its insights into managerial subjectivity, but has yet to receive sufficient attention, is the subjectivity of those managers who *produce* the discourses in question. Existing studies tend to analyse changes in organisations in a 'top-down' manner, exploring the relationship between strategies devised by senior management and the responses to these by workers at the 'shop floor' level. The subjectivity of management in this process is thereby

inadequately addressed. Yet, as McKinlay and Starkey (1998) show, control is not simply exercised by management and experienced by workers. General Motor's assembly plant extended the surveillance normally reserved for shop floor workers onto managerial employees (ibid). In fact, Kerfoot and Knights (1995) argue that "the disciplinary effects of 'new' managerial discourses may be *more intense* for management than the workforce on whom they are targeted" (p.236 emphasis added).

For example, Knights and Morgan (1991) describe the disciplinary effects of the discourse of 'strategy' in relation to managerial subjectivity. The authors describe how managers account for their work in terms of the discourse of 'strategy' as it provides them with rationalisations for their actions that enhances and sustains the exercise of managerial power. Managers are also keen to take up the discourse of 'strategy' because it offers them a sense of identity as a competent and worthy manager with attendant gains in organisational security. Similarly, du Gay, Salaman and Rees (1996) explain how the notion of 'management competencies' has re-conceptualised what it means to be a 'competent manager' in contemporary organisations. From these studies it is clear that managers are also subject to attempts to 'govern their soul' (Rose, 1999).

Indeed, Deetz (1998) suggests that these less direct 'cultural' control strategies are *most commonly* used to regulate managerial and professional 'knowledge' workers, who have traditionally secured greater autonomy and self-management over their working practices than other work groups. The work of such groups is often complex, intangible and resistant to simple forms of measurement (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2000). Cultural control is therefore seen as an appropriate and effective form of organisational influence over workers who retain

discretion over their work. Yet Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson (2000) describe how, in the consultancy firm they studied, such discretion over work activities was nevertheless 'hard won' through consent to the strict regulation of 'play' activities.

Although existing studies of managerial subjectivity offer great insight, most research thus far has considered forms of cultural control that arise from 'outside' the particular working group under scrutiny. For example, Knights and Morgan (1991) see 'strategy' as a concept accorded significance by academic business schools, consultants, financial institutions and the media. Although the cultural control developed in the consultancy firm studied by Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson (2000) was more contextually specific, arising from the charismatic personality of the director, the aim was still to manage culture in a paternalistic fashion through the appointment of a 'culture manager'. Indeed, my own writing in section 2.4 above may be criticised along a similar line. I posed the issues of concern in terms of the 'problem of management control', implying that there existed some 'control imperative' beyond the employees in question. This may not be appropriate in the case of a consultancy team who produced the very same discourse to which they are also subject.

To be clear, this 'top-down' focus may be less a theoretical or methodological oversight than an outcome of the practical problems encountered when attempting to study senior management in organisations – those most often involved in the formulation of organisational discourse. Senior managers are often more restrictive in terms of the time they will offer researchers, and in terms of the levels of access researchers can achieve. Access is often limited to a formal interview and the gathering of formal documentation. This may not be conducive to the sort of depth of ethnographic experience that might be required

for developing an appreciation of the forms of subjectivity under construction (see Chapter 3).

Moreover, the 'problems' managers are interested in, and therefore keen to engage researchers on, are more often framed in terms of the *workforce* as the 'object of control' than in terms of *managers* as the central problematic. Indeed, in many cases the discourse formulated by senior management may not be directly applicable to their own working lives. For example, changes such as TQM and BPR are largely directed at the workforce, not management. Therefore the production/consumption relationship may be less relevant in such cases. Research access and focus may therefore be a significant limiting factor in the case of exploring managerial subjectivity.

Yet by focussing largely on discourses constructed by others, whether by actors within the organisation or the wider discursive space of academic writing and the media, the existing literature on cultural control has yet to address the subjective experiences of groups who are themselves active in formulating a particular discourse⁴. Exploring this relationship between production and consumption could generate insight into the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Here, as is the case for FlexiTeam, there is no 'conspiracy to control' and the locus of power lies 'within' rather than 'without'⁵. FlexiTeam generated the discourse that they apply not only to clients but also to *themselves*. This can be

⁴ This is not to imply that those who are consumers of a discourse constructed by others are passive recipients of the discourse. In this sense, the act of interpreting and enacting a particular discourse can be seen as an instance of *production* as well as consumption, as the discourse is given local meanings which may differ from one another.

⁵ The term 'within' is not used to imply that FlexiTeam generated their consultancy discourse in an autonomous manner, devoid of wider social influence - for example from existing literature, other consultancy models, government agendas or client concerns. (Indeed, FlexiTeam are proud of their ability to adapt their 'solutions' to the clients' 'business drivers'.) Nor is the notion of freedom from control intended to denote that FlexiTeam are free from attempts by TechnoCo to monitor, control and prescribe other aspects of their work, as discussed later in section 5.3.

seen as a 'critical case'. It might be expected that team members' relationship to the discourse would be more intimate, insidious and complete in its constitution of their subjectivity. It is therefore hoped that exploring empirically the forms of subjectivity constructed in the case of FlexiTeam might advance our understanding of the subjectivity/discourse relationship.

The question that is therefore interesting to pose in the case of FlexiTeam is how does their role in selling consultancy services reflect upon their subjectivity? Or, in layman's terms, what are the consequences of attempting to 'walk the walk' as well as 'talk the talk'? By addressing these questions, this thesis hopes to provide a contribution to the field of critical studies of organisations. It is anticipated that the outcomes of exploring this research question may be of more general interest to research into subjectivity and cultural control in organisations.

2.6 Totalised Selves?

It would be straightforward to expect that FlexiTeam members would be effectively self-disciplined by the discourse of 'best practice' virtual teaming, in particular due to the reflexive relation between *practicing* 'virtual teaming' and *selling* related consultancy services. Yet this thesis seeks to question this assumption by offering a more sophisticated analysis of the complexities, subtleties, and ambiguities of subjectivity.

The question remains whether the consultancy discourse is omnipotent and totalising in its effect on team members' subjectivity? Can discourses of organisational change completely colonise employee's sense of self? In other

words, does discourse *determine* subjectivity? This raises the third question posed for this thesis. There exists literature that helps in addressing this question by drawing attention to variation in discursive constitution. It may therefore prove useful to review this additional critical literature that criticises this somewhat simplistic assumption regarding the 'totalising' power of cultural control.

To begin with, the practitioner-oriented culture change literature, which assumes that the colonisation of subjectivity is both possible and desirable, has more recently come under some heavy criticism. In particular, the seminal work of Peters and Waterman (1982) has been criticised on both a conceptual and methodological level (Guest, 1992). Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 622) have suggested that attempts to regulate identity may fail to increase employee commitment and loyalty, and may even "amplify cynicism, spark dissent or catalyse resistance".

Legge (1994) has further questioned both the possibility and desirability of managing culture. Similarly, Ackers and Preston (1997) have criticised the ethics and efficacy of attempts by employers to capture the 'soul' of employees - a process akin to religious conversion. They argue that, unlike religious conversion, identification with corporate goals is not a voluntary and wilful commitment. This calls into question not only whether cultural control is likely to be effective in 'winning souls', but also whether it is morally defensible. In this respect, the analogy to religion could be seen as overstated and inaccurate (ibid).

Furthermore, the range of different metaphors employed to understand culture indicates that disagreement over what culture 'is' and 'does' may not be conducive to developing a 'science' of managing culture (Alvesson, 1993). A

central contribution of critical studies undoubtedly involves a questioning of the ability of management to *manage* culture. Employees are not 'cultural dopes' and the workforce is not a vacuum into which senior management can pour their desired values (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2000). Senior management is not the only voice within an organisation, and the corporate culture that is often shared by senior management might be one of several subcultures within an organisation (Legge, 1994). Management certainly cannot assume that the reengineered culture will necessarily be listened to and internalised to any extent beyond what Legge (1994) terms 'resigned behavioural compliance', or what Willmott (1993) terms 'instrumental compliance'.

The value of critical research lies in its ability to explicate the range of subjective responses to managerial techniques such as cultural control. While acknowledging that subjective self-discipline can be a more effective form of control than coercion, it also has its limits and points of resistance (Knights and McCabe, 1998, 1998a, 1999, 2000, 2000a). It is important not to overstate the extent and effectiveness of new management practices while marginalizing the potential for resistance (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). For example, McKinlay and Taylor (1998) concluded from their study of a 'factory of the future' that, in spite of managerial ambitions, new HRM practices such as teamwork did not enable management to 'govern the soul' of its employees in a total fashion.

Accordingly, theorists of organisational discourse have increasingly come under criticism with respect to their theorisation of power and discourse. For example, Fournier and Grey (1999) have criticised the work of Paul du Gay (1996) along three dimensions. First, they argue that du Gay claims 'too much' for the power of the enterprise discourse he describes. Second, they argue that du Gay's analysis

places 'too little' emphasis on resistance and alternative discourses. Third and finally, they argue that by reiterating his argument 'too often' he is implicated in constituting the power and 'factuality' of the very discourse he purports to describe. The first and second critiques regarding power and resistance are explored further in the next section.

2.7 Power and Resistance in Organisations

The collection of papers in Jermier, Knights and Nord (1994) is an important contribution to the analysis of power and resistance in organisations. The collection advances a more sophisticated analysis of power within organisations, whereby power is not the possession of certain individuals or groups (typically management) to be imposed upon those who are powerless (typically workers) in a top-down fashion. Attention thus turns to how power 'works' rather than what it is or who possesses it (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994).

Power is instead conceptualised as relational: working through subject's actions rather than being the possession of individuals (Townley, 1994). Power cannot be understood as universally oppressive or omnipotent because it always acts upon subjects who can 'do otherwise', making power necessarily unstable and always subject to resistance (Knights and Morgan, 1991). In this sense, power and resistance are inseparable, and resistance is not something opposite to and outside of power (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). Power should therefore be studied in its ascending form at the micro-level of contextually specific institutional practices, techniques and forms of knowledge that are deployed in attempts to shape the conduct of others (Townley, 1994). Further, power is not only constraining and repressive but also enabling and productive of subjectivity

(Knights and Morgan, 1991). For example, power can transform employees into subjects whose sense of being 'worthy' and 'competent' organisational members is secured through the social practices it creates and sustains (ibid).

By paying attention to the 'lived experience' of those implicated in culture change programs, researchers can demonstrate how employees are active participants in the reproduction of the power relations in which they are situated, not merely 'passive victims' of a totalising management control (Knights and McCabe, 1998a). In addition to surpassing an essentialist conception of the individual as a fixed entity impermeable to the influence of others, a more sophisticated understanding of subjectivity must go beyond a conception of the person as a passive product of power and a mere reflection of discourse (Ezzy, 1997). In short, discourse does not *determine* subjectivity.

Scholars are therefore advised to pay attention to how subjects relate to and 'manoeuvre' around discourse (Newton, 1998). This involves rejecting a view of discourse as determining local power relations in favour of a contextual analysis of the development of discourse within local social relations (ibid). As Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 621) argue:

"We reject any suggestion that management is omnipotent in its definition of employee identity. ... Organisational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities."

Researchers should therefore be sensitive to variation in discursive constitution, exploring how discourses can be variously accepted, resisted and transformed in the context of worker's local social relations (Newton, 1998).

For example, in the case of Business Process Re-engineering in a financial services organisation studied by Knights and McCabe (1998a), the concept of 'empowerment' may have been embraced and adopted by some, but was seen by others as a patronising form of self-charity. A range of responses are described by the authors - from welcoming the new discourse, distancing from the discourse, resisting the discourse, to hardly noticing the discourse.

Moreover, it is important to be aware of the way in which employees may express a number of the aforementioned responses at different times and in different contexts. Subjective responses are often characterised by *ambiguity* and *ambivalence*. Hence it is misleading to make generalising claims about the 'impact' of culture change programs or the 'effects' of new technologies on employee subjectivity (Knights and McCabe, 1998a; Ball and Wilson, 2000). It is therefore important to avoid viewing discourses as placing "totalising, unmediated constraints upon human subjects" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 622).

Indeed, Knights and McCabe (2000a) directly criticise the work of Sewell (1998) and Barker (1999) by presenting a more sophisticated analysis of the range of possible subjective responses to teamwork. Although there were those who were indeed 'bewitched' by the discourse and internalised its norms and values, there were also others who were 'bothered' by its intrusion into their lives, and those who were 'bewildered' by its attack on their established routines. Teamwork therefore did not deterministically generate a single normalising experience for employees, as the authors suggest was concluded by Barker and Sewell.

Similarly, the ethnographic work of Casey (1995) describes a range of subjective responses to the engineering of corporate culture in a high-technology firm. For

some employees a 'colluded self' was constructed, which was at once compliant, dependent and ambitious within the corporate culture. For others, a 'defensive self' was constructed, where small-scale resistances, retreats and blockages were attempted in response to the confusion, ambivalence, fear and anxiety brought about by the changes in working life. The prevailing self-strategy of employees involved the 'capitulated self': employees negotiated a pragmatic or reluctant settlement of relative subjective stability from the familial team, to compensate for the experience of assault upon the self under the new corporate culture.

2.8 Individualisation

It is noteworthy that the subjective reactions described above constitute forms of 'individualised' responses to attempts at cultural control. To clarify this term, individualisation does *not* refer to a process whereby workers regain a sense autonomy and control of themselves (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000). Rather, individualisation refers to a process whereby the worker is represented as the centre and source of social action, distinct from all other persons and responsible for his or her own destiny (in the presumed absence of social constraints) (ibid).

Knights and McCabe (2000: 423) put forward the following definition:

“... individualisation is the effect of the power of a humanistic discourse that elevates and celebrates the autonomy of the self in contrast to the communality of the social.”

du Gay (1996; 1996a) examines in detail the effects of one particularly prevalent discourse which he calls 'enterprise discourse' on employees' subjectivity in the retail sector. du Gay shows how enterprise discourse involves a reconfiguration

of the employee's relationship not only to customers but also *themselves* through reflexive self-monitoring. The values of self-realisation, personal responsibility, ownership and accountability are presented as not only economically desirable but also personally attractive and virtuous characteristics. In short, employees are 'autonomised' and 'responsibilised' in a process of *individualisation*.

Another example concerns the contemporary career discourses of 'free agents' and 'do-it-yourself careers' (see for example Brosseau et al, 1996; Hall, 1996; Nicholson, 1996). These discourses invite workers to view themselves as determining their own career trajectory, while employers are thought to merely respond to the skills and talents of individuals by offering ability-based promotions. Discourses such as these have the power effect of separating subjects off from one another and placing them in competition for scarce rewards and social recognition (Knights and Willmott, 1989). Subjects are also thereby rendered more directly responsible for their own actions and situation (ibid).

Both du Gay (1996) and Ezzy (2001) argue that the trend toward individualism witnessed in the 'engineered cultures' of the workplace has links to a broader social trend toward 'consumerist' definitions of social relations. Forms of individualism in the workplace can therefore be interpreted as a condition and consequence of a wider social trend towards the 'individualisation' of the social. The paradox is that even forms of organisational change such as teamwork, which emphasise communality and inter-relationships, can be seen to foster forms of "self-gratificatory narcissistic individualism" (Ezzy, 2001: 631).

Individualisation involves consequences for the possible forms of subjective response taken by employees faced with organisation control mechanisms. This

is particularly evident in Knights and Morgan's (1991a) study of subjectivity in the labour process of life insurance sales. A primary power effect of discourses of 'the individual' was the assumption that only individual solutions could be found for problems (such as work intensification) that could equally well have been managed socially (for instance through collective action).

The authors delineate three 'individualised' subjective responses to a failure to secure a stable sense of self-identity as a 'good salesperson'. Some employees chose 'employment separation', either through mental separation by ignoring the pressures of the job or by literally leaving the company. Others responded with 'dream of promotion', in spite of the restricted prospects of advancement. Finally, some employees responded through 'escape into work', for example by utilising their discretion over the sales process to develop a distinctive style and approach. Knights and Morgan's (1991a) study thereby offers insight regarding the possible 'individualising' social consequences of the discursive constitution of subjectivity in organisations. The challenge for my study is therefore to explore what possible individualised responses might be generated to the culture change toward virtual teamwork in FlexiTeam.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter began by reviewing practitioner-oriented literature pertaining to the topic of this thesis – virtual teams (2.1). This literature highlighted the tensions that were thought to arise when teleworkers (working apart) form a team (working together). The central argument of this literature was that virtual teams are *managerially problematic* (2.1.1). This literature was highly prescriptive in nature and suggested a series of changes to the communication, knowledge sharing,

managerial control and trust relations of organisations (2.1.2 – 2.1.5 respectively). These changes were advocated as ‘best practice’ and posited as necessary for the organisation concerned to realise the potential benefits of virtual teams. These changes appeared to probe the fundamental values, norms, practices and routines of the organisation. In other words, virtual teamwork could be seen to involve a ‘culture change’ (2.1.6).

The second section (2.2) outlined the distinctive benefits that may be derived from taking a *critical* perspective on virtual teams. Adopting a critical perspective enabled me to ask questions that were marginalized in the practitioner literature. In order to address the first research question posed in this thesis, insights from Science and Technology Studies were employed to interrogate the essentialism and determinism inherent in statements regarding the effortless and flexible nature of teleworking (2.3). This suggested a consideration of the possible ‘hidden’ forms of labour and discipline implied in virtual teamwork may be an important issue for my empirical work.

The literature review then extended its reach to explore what insights may be derived from reviewing literature on cultural changes other than virtual teamwork. A body of critical literature examining cultural change initiatives such as teamwork, BPR and TQM was reviewed (2.4). It was argued that employee subjectivity is a central medium and outcome of contemporary methods of organisational control. This literature helped address the second research question of this thesis. However, this literature was also criticised for focussing exclusively on ‘top-down’ examples of change and failing to explore managerial subjectivity sufficiently (2.5). In particular, the focus on discourse as something that exists ‘outside’ was criticised for failing to explore the forms of subjectivity

experienced by those who are active in producing the discourse in question. My study aims to address this concern and thereby hopes to contribute to the development of theory regarding subjectivity.

To address the third and final research question, literature was reviewed that advances the theorisation of subjectivity by considering the possible limits to the power of discourse in colonising subjectivity (2.6). This led us to a review of literature regarding power and resistance in organisations (2.7). Finally, the trend toward individualisation evident in the previous section was discussed (2.8). The challenge for this thesis is therefore to address the concerns about subjectivity raised in the critical literature in relation to the empirical phenomenon of 'virtual teams'. The methodology through which this was achieved is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses in detail the methodological issues involved in my research project. To begin with, the section on epistemology (3.1) argues that a discursive perspective offers a promising and insightful way of conceptualising virtual teams – the topic of this research. Leading from this epistemological perspective, it is suggested that a qualitative, ethnographic methodology might be an appropriate methodology for collecting data regarding the discursive constitution of subjectivity within a virtual team. The rest of the chapter therefore discusses the methodological choices and issues involved in this ethnographic study.

First, the research design is outlined (3.2), including the significance of conducting a *virtual* ethnography in the context of my research setting. Second, the chapter considers some reflections upon conducting virtual ethnography, as compared to more conventional ethnographic research that is conducted face-to-face (3.3). Third, qualitative research in general is not without its problems, so the next section (3.4) aims to tackle issues of reflexivity and the influence of the researcher. Fourth, the discussion moves on to offer a brief description of the methods of data analysis used in this research (3.5). Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining how I tackled the ethics and confidentiality issues involved in the study (3.6).

3.1 Epistemology

The literature review discussed in depth the various debates regarding subjectivity, power and control in organisations (see sections 2.4 onwards). It was argued that a discursive perspective in particular offers a sophisticated and insightful approach to these issues. The discursive perspective represents a particular epistemology – a view of how we gain knowledge about the world. Epistemology has significance because it is linked to the way the researcher sees the world she wishes to study – her view of ontology. Together these have implications for the type of method that could best be used to capture knowledge about the world. As the philosophy on which methodological choices are based, a discussion of epistemology is therefore an important part of this chapter.

This section elaborates on the discursive perspective and makes a case for the benefits that may be derived from its use in my study. This involves a consideration of the implications of taking a discursive perspective not only for *subjectivity* (discussed in detail in section 2.4), but also the implications of its use in the study of *organisation* and *technology*. These concepts are relevant because this thesis involves the study of a ‘virtual team’ using Information and Communication Technologies to coordinate their activities, situated in a large commercial organisation.

The epistemological debates regarding organisation and technology are both highly complex. Due to constraints on space, I will focus on those debates that are most relevant to my research topic. It is nevertheless important to be clear about how a discursive approach may influence the way these phenomenon are conceptualised, as this influences how they might be best approached methodologically in my empirical research.

A discursive perspective involves a criticism of the premise of those adhering to a 'realist perspective'. This premise upholds that objects, whether they are technological artefacts or social concepts such as 'organisation', have a straightforward ontological existence independent of language. A discursive perspective points instead to the way in which reality has to be constructed continually through discourse – various forms of material inscription or verbal utterances – in order that objects may become conceptually fixed and understood within communication (Chia, 2000).

Discourse is seen to stabilize the meaning of phenomenon such as 'team' or 'technology' such that it becomes possible to talk about them as naturally occurring entities (ibid). To talk about an object of study, whether technological or social, is to talk about something that is already invested with certain language-based distinctions (Tsoukas, 2000). Indeed, the very distinction between what is technical and what is social can be seen as grounded in discursive processes (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994). In short, a discursive perspective argues that discourse does not simply *reflect* an independent reality. It instead argues that discourse is better understood as *constitutive* of the reality it purports to represent.

It must be made clear that a discursive perspective is just one epistemological approach. The discursive perspective has its problems and limitations and has of course been subject to critique, on issues such as value (Parker, 2000), determinism and agency (Newton, 1998) and its theorization of objective and material structures (Reed, 2000), for example. Notwithstanding these criticisms and limitations, a discursive perspective is used in this research project for its ability to provide an insightful lens on the 'virtual team' phenomenon, one that

brings to light particular interesting questions and problems that may be sidelined in other perspectives. The questions and problems that have been ignored or taken-for-granted within practitioner literature on virtual teams were discussed in the literature review (section 2.2 onwards).

As du Gay (2000) argues, a discursive perspective (or culturalist perspective as he terms it) is exactly that - a particular perspective rather than a 'God's eye view':

"After all, a culturalist lens is precisely that, a lens that provides a specific view, a certain angle on things, not a metaphysically superior perspective in light of which all things can be better viewed. ... Rather, it adopts a particular point of view which seeks to bring to light a domain of questions to be asked and practices to be analysed."

(ibid: 167)

In light of this understanding, the discussion shall now move on to examine what insights are derived from exploring a discursive perspective in relation to two concepts important in this thesis – organisation and technology.

3.1.1 Organisation

From a discursive perspective, discourse about forms of organization - such as the contemporary phenomenon known as 'teams' - does not refer to a bounded and pre-existing entity that can be easily identified and studied by the researcher. The methodological implication is therefore that teams do not have clear-cut boundaries that the researcher can pinpoint, whereby an individual is objectively either inside or outside the team. The focus is instead on how boundaries are actively negotiated and maintained. Taking this perspective enabled me to focus

on how FlexiTeam was actively constructed as participants orientated themselves towards acting as a 'team'. Being a 'team' was the outcome not the starting point of their social action, an outcome never final and stable but always in the making.

For example, when Eric left the team the remaining team members reconstituted his identity as a 'rival' and 'competitor' in their talk at Team Meetings. This could be interpreted from a realist perspective as an objective outcome of his new role as a competitor. Yet a discursive perspective enabled me to understand how Eric's new identity was discursively constructed by himself and others. When I met Eric at a conference, I treated him as a participant of my study, as before, and started to talk about the emerging findings of my study. But Eric himself oriented to his re-constructed identity as a 'rival' when he said this conversation might be inappropriate now he had left the team – he was now a competitor and my study 'belonged' to TechnoCo.

A discursive perspective can also be used to gain an enhanced understanding of TechnoCo as a large scale organisation. Realist ontology may posit that organisations exist objectively as coherent social units which are amenable to analysis using methods from the natural sciences (Reed, 1992). From this perspective, organisations are thought to be fundamentally 'ordered' and rationally 'organised'. This is the term 'organisation' understood as a *noun* (Parker, 1997).

The discursive perspective developed in this thesis involves scepticism of claims to an inherent rationality and objectivity. Organising is perhaps better conceptualised as a cultural, social and political process. This reveals how assumptions about stability and order might hide the political and ideological

manipulations occurring in organisations. Organisation is therefore akin to other kinds of 'black box': it is a negotiated achievement of dubious stability (Cockburn, 1994). Organisational analysis is thus able to focus upon diversity, plurality, uncertainty and fragmentation (Reed, 1992).

A discursive perspective therefore focuses more on the term 'organisation' as a *verb*: an active process of constructing (but never irreversibly fixing) order, coherence and stability (Parker, 1997). This enables the researcher to see any actor's conception of what an organisation is (including the researcher's) as a subjective, situated interpretation within endless organising processes. Organisation is thus understood as a contested process of making claims and counter-claims, meaning there is no place or time from which any organisation can be finally captured and presented as 'fact'. This view of language suggests that any claims to explanation are partial.

A discursive perspective also enables the researcher to focus on the moral and political implications of the discourse of being a 'team', for instance. I was able to ask what the particular discourse in question *does*, as well as what it represents and how it represents it (Reed, 2000). For example, the literature review (section 2.4) argued that the discourse of 'teamwork' anticipates particular forms of behaviour and seeks to constitute members' subjectivity in a normative fashion. Indeed, my findings show how being part of a 'team' involves judgement of behaviour according to a particular conception of how a 'team player' should act and interact, with normative consequences for team members' subjectivity (see section 5.4).

3.1.2 Technology

This thesis is not concerned with technology in the sense that it aims to reflect upon or inform the design and use of technology in virtual teams. Virtual teams use a range of ICTs and this study does not therefore focus upon any one particular artefact. The focus of this thesis is the normative control of subjectivity in a virtual team. However, technology is important part of the story because it is ascribed significance by the participants for its role in *enabling* and *supporting* virtual teamwork.

The discursive perspective employed in this thesis takes issue with the deterministic and essentialist assumptions underpinning these claims regarding technology (see section 2.3). First, to claim that new technology *enables* virtual teamwork suggests a technologically deterministic 'cause-effect' relationship whereby the autonomous development of new technology, such as the Internet, causes new forms of work arrangement such as teleworking to arise.

The discursive perspective of this thesis questions this assumption by focussing instead upon the social processes whereby teleworking may (or may not) be taken up by organisations and individuals. The technological determinist argument implies that, because the technology is available, then every job that can technically be performed from home is being 'teleworked'. This is clearly not the case. A discursive perspective may therefore have advantages in being able to explore the social processes through which teleworking is realised in practice, and indeed how the label 'teleworking' itself is constructed and applied. In fact, the participants of this study are themselves a significant social actor in exactly this construction process by virtue of their activities in promoting teleworking.

FlexiTeam are acutely aware that clients do not implement teleworking just because the technology is available – they must be persuaded that teleworking is viable and beneficial for themselves and their organisation.

Second, the assumption that technology *supports* virtual teamwork implies an essentialistic view of technology. Technology is presumed to have objective capacities and an intrinsic value for helping virtual team members coordinate their work activities. For example, email is assumed to have the intrinsic property of overcoming distance and making possible the coordination of dispersed activities. The notion that technology has essential ‘effects’ derived from the technical properties of the artefact, along with the technological determinism described above, have both been criticised by a well established body of literature that has become known as ‘Science and Technology Studies’ (STS).

This body of literature rejects essentialism in favour of viewing technology as interpretively flexible. Although there are many distinct and often competing perspectives in STS, most authors are interested in how what a technology ‘is’ and ‘does’ is the outcome of social processes through which the ‘technology’ itself is constructed. In this respect, there may not exist any seemingly unambiguous ‘thing’ that can be recognised as such by everyone. Rather, different ‘relevant social groups’ may attribute different meanings to ostensibly the “same” artefact (Bijker, 1990).

The discursive perspective makes it less sensible to ask questions regarding the deterministic ‘effects’ of technology. For example, giving teleworkers mobile phones does not deterministically produce a unified and cohesive ‘team’. The discursive perspectives enabled me to focus on the social processes that

constructed the performance of virtual teamwork in FlexiTeam. For example, Chapter 4 will describe the range of norms regarding work practices that FlexiTeam constructed to ensure mobile phones were used correctly, with the aim of making team members feel together while physically apart (see section 4.3.5).

Taking a discursive perspective makes it possible to see how claims about the 'effect' or 'impact' of technology, or its 'potential' or 'viability', are constructed by various actors through discourse. Technologies neither speak for themselves nor do they exist outside human interpretation (Grint & Woolgar, 1997). There is an irremediable ambiguity about what a technology is and can do, although certain readings tend to become stable or preferred (Woolgar, 1996).

This enables the researcher to understand how different meanings of technology can co-exist. For example, some authors view email as intrinsically low in 'richness' and alienating (cf. Dimitrova and Salaff, 1998), whereas others emphasise its superior capacity for relationship and community building (cf. Wellman *et al*, 1996). Rather than attempting to decipher the 'real' meaning of the technology, it is more interesting to look at how the meaning of email depends on its use in a particular social context. This also helps us to understand how supposedly 'technically superior' technologies may not be taken up in organisations. For example, although video-conferencing is deemed 'technically superior' to the supposedly 'limited' communicative potential of email, it is not necessarily the most widely used, as evidenced by its low uptake in organisations (Rapp and Arleback, 2001).

The methodological implication of taking a discursive perspective on technology is that the researcher should focus not on the essential technical characteristics of the technology, but instead examine the role of actors as they seek to construct particular meanings of the technology. It is therefore not useful to appeal to the intrinsic 'value' or 'usefulness' of technology (McLaughlin et al, 1999). It is perhaps more insightful to examine how the 'value' of technology is constructed in its context of use. In the case of audio-conferencing in my study, for example, it was widely used and valued by FlexiTeam but sporadically and infrequently used by the other teams I studied. This can be placed in the context of FlexiTeam's role in offering consultancy advice regarding 'best practice' communication processes for virtual teams (see section 5.2).

3.1.3 Epistemology and Methodology

The discursive perspective employed in this thesis shifts the focus away from the essential characteristics of organisation, technology and subjectivity towards the discursive processes through which they are constituted. This has implications for the sort of research methods most appropriate for gaining knowledge of the social world.

Quantitative methods such as surveys, questionnaires and experiments are not renowned for their insight into the discursive understandings and meanings of the participants. The discursive perspective suggests that a positivistic methodology whereby the researcher uses scientific instruments to capture, measure and report the causal relationships of an objective reality, would be both inappropriate and inadequate. In the case of a 'realist' epistemology, even where ostensibly qualitative methods such as interviews are used, the researcher may presume

that the interviewee's account is a truthful reflection of some mental state or 'attitude', independent of the researcher's conceptualisations.

Ethnography is one qualitative method that often proves useful for exploring the way in which participants discursively construct their social reality. Ethnography maintains a commitment to seeing the world as the participants themselves view their situation (Bryman, 1988). The aim of (organisational) ethnography is to gain an experiential understanding of the participants (work) lives, including how members make their world meaningful for themselves and others (Watson, 1994).

For those undertaking ethnography from a realist perspective, the ethnographer is seen to be able to capture an objective picture of the lives of participants. However, from the discursive perspective taken in this thesis, the ethnographer does not claim to capture and reproduce an objective rendering of the world in her report. Rather she constructs a story, a situated narrative developed from the necessarily partial and located perspective recorded during her fieldwork. What is recorded during fieldwork, and what is subsequently reproduced in the report, involves a number of methodological issues and choices. The issues, choices and debates involved in my ethnography are explored in more detail in the rest of this chapter, starting with research design.

3.2 Research Design

Ethnographic research cannot be programmed and certainly does not involve following a set of methodological rules. However, this does not mean that ethnography is so open-ended that research design is superfluous (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In other words, although the course of fieldwork cannot be

predetermined, this does not remove the need for focusing on a particular phenomenon or problem. This section will explain how I selected the participants of the study and how I collected empirical data about these participants.

3.2.1 Selecting Participants

The question of 'who' should be part of my study was of major significance to the empirical data I would gather to address my research question. As argued in the Introduction (section 1.1.1), the sample was not be selected according to a strict definition of what 'is' and 'is not' teleworking. The aim was not to select a statistically representative sample of teleworkers in order to generate findings that could be generalised to a wider population, in a manner characteristic of positivistic methodology (see discussion above).

This study adopts a discursive approach that seeks to gain an in-depth experiential understanding of a team of teleworkers within their particular social context. Many different strategies were therefore available to identify and involve research participants. Some researchers may use a snowballing method of following connections from friends and acquaintances, whereas others may publicise an appeal for participants through various media such as newspapers or the Internet.

I decided to begin my attempt to gain access to a teleworking population by targeting large companies I understood (from the literature and conferences I had attended) to be operating formal teleworking programs. This was mainly for pragmatic reasons: one sponsor or gatekeeper can help to provide access to a large number of potential participants. Attendance at the "Telework 2000"

conference during September 2000 in London proved particularly valuable because many corporate representatives were present.

TechnoCo were a major sponsor of the conference that year, and FlexiTeam had a stand at the conference in order to promote their consultancy services. My discussions with Eric and Terry at their stand proved invaluable in making initial contact about the possibility of conducting research with TechnoCo. After the conference I emailed a research proposal to Terry as promised. When preliminary approval had been granted to conduct the research, we arranged a face-to-face meeting to discuss the research further.

The original plan had been to source participants from other parts of TechnoCo using FlexiTeam as a sponsor (not participant) of the research. I was kindly given the names of people who could help me in the process of recruiting participants. It was during a (face-to-face) discussion with Duncan that the possibility of studying FlexiTeam was suggested. They were after all, Duncan told me, teleworkers themselves! Through this contact I progressively met (physically and virtually) all ten members of FlexiTeam. Permission was granted to conduct the study, and in January 2001 the fieldwork was underway.

This early decision to focus on teleworking at an organisational level had a major influence on the subsequent focus of the thesis. The field of literature from which I draw my insight and aim to contribute – critical studies of organisations – may well have been different if my group of participants had not been from a company-wide teleworking scheme. The thesis would have probably involved different theories and questions if my participants had been self-employed teleworkers, so-called ‘portfolio’ workers or teleworkers in a small family-owned

business. My choice of participants is a significant and problematic issue that must be addressed for its role in limiting the possible conclusions that may be made from my study.

At the beginning of the research I had not yet made the decision to base my thesis upon FlexiTeam alone. This decision was made during the later stages of data analysis and write-up. I was therefore keen to gain access to more teams in order to increase the breadth of my study. Terry kindly gave me the contact details of Shirley - another employee who had been active in the implementation of 'Work-anywhere' (TechnoCo's teleworking program) and with a keen interest in teleworking - in the hope that she would help me source further participants.

After meeting with Shirley to discuss my research proposal, she kindly sent a request for participation by email to every manager in her department. This led to a further six managers with teams as large as 50 employees expressing an interest in participating in my study. I whittled down this list to two teams, based on my research interests at the time and my perception of their level of available time and commitment to the research.

These two additional teams, based in government technology sales and in finance, were studied in more limited depth and for a shorter period of time. I recognised that the more cases I selected for study the less time I could spend in each. The researcher must invariably trade off between the breadth and depth of the investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Indeed, I was unfortunately unable to spend as much time with the two newly recruited teams as I spent with FlexiTeam. Nevertheless, my fieldwork experience with these two other teams was invaluable because it sensitised me to the importance of social context in

constructing the local experience of virtual teamwork. This issue is explored further later on in section 5.1.

3.2.2 Data Collection Methods

Having established 'who' was to participate in my fieldwork, the central methodological questions for the research design were then *what* data would I seek to collect and *how* would I go about collecting this data? These decisions and negotiations were also to have major implications for my ability to address my research questions.

The literature review (section 2.4) established that an important aspect of organisational change such as virtual teamwork concerns the normative control of subjectivity. It was argued that subjectivity is best understood as a social construct implicated in discourse, not an essential property of individuals. Therefore, to understand the processes of discursive constitution of subjectivity requires an appreciation of the social context in which subjectivity is negotiated. Ethnography appeared best placed to generate this understanding. Through participant observation of the work lives of participants, I hoped to gain at least a minimal experiential understanding of the work lives of the participants.

Ethnography originated in the field of anthropology and is the discipline's central methodology, to be taken up at a later date by sociology. Anthropological and sociological fieldwork have great similarities but also many differences. Van Maanen (1988: 21) suggests "the most fundamental difference is that anthropologists go elsewhere to practice their trade while sociologists stay at home." Ethnography refers to both a method of collecting data (the ethnographic

method) and the written product (the ethnographic thesis). This section discusses the former, while the representational issues involved in the latter are debated in the section on reflexivity (section 3.3).

Ethnography is based on trying to gain an understanding of 'the native's point of view', rather than imposing the researcher's framework upon the situation (Woolgar, 1988). Therefore,

"To write an ethnography requires at a minimum some understanding of the language, concepts, categories, practices, rules, beliefs, and so forth, used by members of the written about group."

(Van Maanen, 1988: 13)

The method of developing this understanding is fieldwork. Fieldwork involves

"participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives over an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research."

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1)

Fieldwork should be of sufficient detail and time to enable the researcher to be in a position to "[take] the viewpoint of those studied, understanding the situated character of interaction and viewing social processes over time" (Silverman, 1993: 48). As Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 638) argue with regard 'identity regulation' – the focus of this study:

"Methodologically, our discussion suggests the relevance of in-depth and longitudinal studies based upon participant observation ... rather than, say, survey-based research or closed ended interviews. To illuminate

processes of identity regulation, it is important to examine their contextual product in some detail and over time.”

Ethnography, therefore, is insightful in its emphasis on understanding detail and context over a period of time. The fieldwork aimed to produce a ‘rich description’ of life in FlexiTeam and convey to the reader a sense of what it was like to be a member of the team. Ethnography is also insightful in its treatment of the researcher-participant relationship. The intimacy and familiarity of this relationship is treated as the source of insight rather than a problem or by-product of the research (Amit, 2000). The level of familiarity and acceptance I achieved can be questioned in the sense that I was not employee of TechnoCo, nor did I spend every day studying FlexiTeam. Indeed, the time I spent with FlexiTeam involved ‘observing’ more than ‘participating’. Nevertheless, I feel I was able to spend considerable time getting to know the team, building relationships with the participants in order to appreciate both what they do and who they are.

Although many aspects of the culture were familiar, for example because I myself often ‘telework’, the aim was to treat the culture with “anthropological strangeness” (Latour and Woolgar, 1986: 29) and “adopt the perspective of the stranger” (ibid: 278)⁶. This enabled me to bracket my familiarity with the object of study and make explicit the taken-for-granted assumptions held by the participants (ibid). Travelling to a foreign country was not necessary to obtain this effect (ibid). *In situ* observation was also well placed in this case for “maintaining analytic distance upon explanations of activity prevalent within the culture being observed” (ibid: 278) and gaining first-hand experience of activity that is relatively unhindered by retrospective reconstruction (i.e. interviews) (ibid).

⁶ Latour and Woolgar (1986: 279) prefer the notion of *uncertainty* as to the nature of the society under study, as opposed to the notion of exoticism, which depends on a rigid distinction between insider and outsider.

However, Latour and Woolgar (1986) also argue that it is misleading to interpret observational data as a somehow 'better' or 'more accurate' version of activity than the 'distorted' versions offered by those removed from the scene, such as in an interview context. Indeed, ethnography and interviews can be seen as compatible methods. 'Longitudinal' interviewing in particular, which extracts multiple perspectives and accounts over time, can sometimes achieve insight akin to that of full-depth participant observation (Gellner and Hirsch, 1999). The two methods may therefore be conceptualised along a continuum rather than as different and opposing methods.

3.2.3 Interviews

My research design included interviews with all members of FlexiTeam⁷. This constitutes nine interviews with members of FlexiTeam. I also conducted interviews with the four members of the Finance team. Interviews typically lasted around one hour and were held at a location decided by the participant, usually a meeting room, cafe/restaurant or home office. The interviews were tape-recorded using either a Dictaphone or larger machine with a small microphone placed in-between the interviewee and interviewer.

The generic interview schedule is given in Appendix 1, although it must be pointed out that these questions were initially developed before entering the field and were subsequently revised as the fieldwork progressed. In all cases the

⁷ I was able to interview every member of FlexiTeam apart from Martin. Martin had recently taken over leadership of the team and replied that he was "too busy" when I asked for an interview. I did not 'push' the issue by asking again.

schedule acted as a guide and did not preclude letting the interview develop in line with the issues the interviewee wanted to discuss.

Ethnography and interviews can be seen as complementary when the data from each source can be used to enhance the understanding of the other. This is a methodological advantage of combining the two methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). What is seen in observation can influence how the researcher interprets what is said in interviews. Conversely, what is said in interviews can lead the researcher to see things differently in observation⁸.

Ethnography can enhance the interviewing process in many ways. The interview questions can be based on the subject's vocabulary learned from the period of observation (Silverman, 1993). Indeed, I adapted my interview schedule as the ethnography progressed, and for each individual participant, as my knowledge of FlexiTeam and the team members developed. I also saw advantages in the level of rapport and depth of probing that seemed to be enhanced by the time I had already spent with the participants (ibid). Another advantage I experienced was the ability to elicit data that may have been unlikely to occur if 'unsolicited' by myself.

“Interviewing can be an extremely important source of data: it may allow one to generate information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise - both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies.”

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 131)

⁸ Interview data that appears to be contradicted by observation should not be treated as self-evidently mistaken in the light of more 'objective' data (Silverman, 1993: 200). Interviewees are not providing a sociological explanation of their observed behaviour in terms of 'motives' 'behind' their behaviour. Rather the researcher should recognise the way in which interviewees attempt to accomplish acceptable accounts within the interview context. The role of the researcher is not to adjudicate between participants' competing versions, rather to understand the situated work they perform (ibid: 157-8).

For example, in my study I found that interviewees reflected upon their use of ICTs when prompted by my interview questions in a way that was not observed amongst the immediacy of their everyday work lives, while they were busy responding to phone calls and emails.

Some authors emphasise the distinction between solicited (interview) and unsolicited (observed) accounts, preferring the supposedly 'naturally occurring' data of observation as a more 'valid' source of information. For this reason ethnographers are advised to avoid interviews as 'artificially invoked' data. Yet, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 131) argue,

“Assuming we understand how the presence of the researcher may have shaped the data, we can interpret the latter accordingly and it can provide important insights, allowing us to develop or test elements of the emerging analysis. There is no reason, then, for ethnographers to shy away from interviews, where these are viable.”

In both interviews and observation, the physical (or virtual) presence of the researcher must be assessed for its influence on the behaviour of participants. Participants construct performances for particular audiences and interviews are simply another context in which this occurs. Therefore,

“while it may sometimes be important to distinguish between solicited and unsolicited accounts, too much must not be made of this distinction. Rather, all accounts must be examined as social phenomena occurring in, and shaped by particular contexts.”

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 156)

Taking account of context and the effects of the researcher suggests that the technique of positivistic interviewing is inappropriate. Interviewees cannot be asked the 'same' questions in order to compare answers by following a standardised protocol. Positivists see a randomly selected interview sample with multiple-choice answers as the best way to achieve valid and reliable data (Silverman, 1993). For the positivist, reality is 'out there' and it is a matter of finding the most precise, objective and unbiased method to gain information about those social 'facts'.

The discursive perspective used in this thesis instead conceptualises participants as actively constructing their social worlds. Therefore, unstructured, open-ended interviews, after a lengthy period of participant observation, enabled me to generate data about how the participants understood and accounted for their social world. The interview questions acted as an outline of topics to be covered and participants were able to guide the conversation onto topics of importance to themselves. The questions were altered as the research progressed, to revise questions on the basis of prior interviews, or eliminate some questions deemed less relevant on the basis of information gained during observation.

Ethnography appears to be distinctive in its commitment to 'methodological holism': accepting in principle that anything in the research context can be relevant and could be taken into account (Gellner and Hirsch, 1999). In the context of this study, 'holism' meant that I sought to participate in the work activities of FlexiTeam wherever and whenever it occurred. This entailed a different approach to that used by anthropologists who traditionally study small, bounded indigenous groups. The ethnographic study of the workplace has a long history. This particular variety of ethnography shall be discussed next.

3.2.4 Workplace Ethnography

Sociologically influenced ethnography is useful for attempting to comprehend social life in the large, complex, unbounded and highly structured organisations that are now ubiquitous in our society (Gellner and Hirsch, 1999). 'Workplace ethnography', as it has become known, has its origins in the Hawthorne studies over sixty years ago (Schwartzman, 1993). The Hawthorne research established the viability of using a range of social science methods to study organisations (ibid). Workplace ethnography is now a method often used within fields such as Science and Technology Studies (STS) (see for example, Latour and Woolgar, 1986), Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) (see Harper, 2000 for a review) and Organisational Behaviour (see Bate, 1997 for a review).

In the case of STS, the workplace is relevant as the site where scientists or technology designers construct the particular fact or artefact in question. Although the theories and perspectives that inform various STS approaches differ, the STS researcher generally looks at the social processes that inform how the science or technology is developed and used. Some of the most well-known studies have looked at life science laboratories (Latour and Woolgar, 1987), the bicycle (Bijker, 1995), hotel keys (Latour, 1991), and the electric car (Callon, 1986).

Similar to STS, the field of CSCW focuses on the technological artefact, but with the explicit intention of better informing technology design. Ethnography has become an increasingly popular method in CSCW for informing technology design (Harper, 2000). Well-known examples include studies of air traffic control, emergency dispatch centres, London Underground control rooms, newsrooms,

construction sites and hospitals (Heath, Knoblauch and Luff, 2000). Ethnography was originally seen as promising within CSCW for its potential to provide the 'answer' to the stage of design known as 'requirements capture'. Although this promise has failed to materialise in the form of generating perfect specifications for computer systems, ethnography is still highly valued in CSCW for its contribution as a method of representing how people do their work (Harper, 2000). CSCW uses workplace ethnography as a way of understanding the methods through which people accomplish work, with the aim of better informing system design and evaluation.

It is clear that the analytical focus of STS and CSCW attend to issues distinct to those addressed in this thesis. My thesis does not aim to analyse the social construction of a technological artefact or scientific fact, nor does it seek to inform the design of technologies. This thesis instead focuses on the work lives of the participants, and the forms of subjectivity that are generated in a virtual team. Many technological artefacts are involved along the way, but these are not the focus of the story. The story concentrates on the processes of normative control in a virtual team.

The version of workplace ethnography employed in this study is therefore closer to the field of 'Organisational Behaviour' (OB). OB seeks to understand the structure and functions of organizations, and the behaviour of groups and individuals within them, by employing methods from the social sciences. OB is an interdisciplinary field drawing primarily on sociology and psychology but with links to economics, engineering, politics and anthropology. Ethnography is just one method used within OB to generate insight into behaviour in organisations. Ethnography and organisation studies were first brought together in the

Hawthorne Studies, helping to found the field of OB (Bate, 1997). Originally a positivistic study designed to investigate the effects of environmental changes on productivity, the Hawthorne Experiments are now cited as providing the foundations of OB in sensitising researchers to the importance of *social* processes in the workplace (ibid).

More recently, constructivist, post-modernist and critical theories of organisations have entered the field (see for example, Grint, 1995; Legge, 1995; Thompson and McHugh, 1990). My contribution to OB is most clearly within these more recent critical and constructivist styles of enquiry. This body of work tends to employ workplace ethnography to gain insight into issues such as power, control, discourse and identity. In this study, I examine precisely these issues in relation to virtual teamwork.

However, the notion of *workplace* ethnography appears at odds with the experiences of a virtual team who have no single *place* of work. FlexiTeam pride themselves on being able to work anywhere, anytime. They have no single place of work; not even a central office where they congregate. For example, the Team Meeting moved location every month. It may therefore have been methodologically limiting to conduct a single-site ethnography and choose one location from which to study FlexiTeam. This is more appropriate for studying a static, geographically bounded group. An alternative methodological approach seemed to be needed.

Ethnographers invariably tend to adapt their methodology to the particular context they are confronted with. This 'methodological flexibility' has become increasingly important as the contexts studied by ethnographers have changed (Amit, 2000).

Therefore, in order to study FlexiTeam effectively, I had to adapt to the different configurations of time and space involved in virtual teamwork. Virtual ethnography seemed to be a useful method for capturing data in this research context.

3.2.5 Virtual Ethnography

The 'where' and 'when' of working life for virtual team members differs greatly from the conventional co-present, nine-to-five working patterns of office based work. I would therefore have gathered a highly impoverished data set if I restricted myself to observation of social life conducted face-to-face, in one place and during certain hours.

FlexiTeam use ICTs such as email, telephone and shared electronic files to communicate with others. Therefore, much of the social action and interaction occurred in 'virtual space'. This meant I could gain experience of the social life of team members without moving from my desk by connecting to the Internet or picking up the phone. This form of research method has been labelled 'virtual ethnography'.

As a virtual ethnographer, I sought to gain similar experiences to those of the participants, however those experiences were mediated (Hine, 2000). If, as Van Maanen (1998: 2) suggests, ethnography is about "living like those who are studied", then if the group meet 'virtually' so too should the ethnographer participate 'virtually'. However, this goes against Van Maanen's (1988: 3) suggestion that "physical displacement" is a requirement of ethnography. My approach instead follows Amit (2000) by arguing against those who posit that the

physical presence of the researcher is a pre-requisite of ethnographic enquiry. By learning through the same media as the informants (Hine, 2000), I was able to gain a reflexive understanding of what it was like to be a virtual team member.

In the context of my study, I felt it was advantageous to follow the connections made by participants – virtual as well as physical – rather than use location to define my object of study. Team members' nomadic work-style meant that when they did meet, the location may well be a client site, a TechnoCo office, a restaurant or a public hot-desk. I therefore adapted my methodology in accordance with these patterns of location. The 'tracking strategy' of this study, as Marcus (1995) terms it, was to 'follow the people'. The ethnographer stays with and follows the movements of a group of initial subjects. In this respect, my ethnography was not just multi-sited – where a pre-defined set of sites is selected for study - but *mobile*. Being a mobile ethnographer meant the sites for study were selected by the participants themselves as they went about their daily working lives.

My virtual ethnography also differs from the multi-sited ethnography identified by Marcus (1995) in emphasising the need to traverse the *virtual* spaces along with participants, in addition to the geographical spaces. To privilege the social interaction occurring in physical space over the sociality in virtual space involves a danger of making essentialistic claims about the (impoverished) nature of technology. This is not a claim I wish to make. The research design for this study therefore involved following the range of physical sites *and* virtual media teleworkers make connections between, without the defining *a priori* the sites or spaces to be selected.

Moreover, I did not wish to treat virtual and physical spaces as disparate domains to be analytically separated for research purposes. The virtual and physical are more often experienced as interconnected spaces in a seamless web of interaction. For example, FlexiTeam often carried on a conversation from email, onto a phone conversation, through an audio-conference and into a discussion at a team meeting. Separating out one media for attention, such as studies of email in organisations (see for example Sproull and Kiesler, 1992), is one particular way to form a research focus (see Rudy, 1996 for a review of research on electronic mail). However, the focus of this thesis is the participant's experience of virtual teamwork. This experience involves a range of different technologies, not only email but also mobile and landline phone, pagers, Intranet, Internet, voicemail, laptops, faxes and so on.

Ruhleder (2000) labels these 'hybrid environments' and urges researchers to rethink their approach to selecting and studying field sites in light of these hybrid virtual/physical worlds. She advocates 'virtual ethnography' as a useful method that responds to these concerns. Thus, the term 'virtual ethnography' is employed in this thesis to refer to the mobile, adaptive and multi-media approach I took to methodology.

3.2.6 Data Collection

The previous section established that virtual ethnography appeared to be a useful method for collecting data about a virtual team. However, virtual ethnography entailed a particular set of problems about 'where' and 'when' data may be collected. I was faced with a series of choices about data collection that might be different to those faced by ethnographers undertaking conventional single-site

ethnography. This section begins with a discussion of the choices I made regarding the physical sites I wanted to access, before moving on to examine the 'virtual' environments I also managed to negotiate access to.

Starting with the physical spaces in which I conducted participant observation, I was invited by FlexiTeam to attend their monthly team meetings⁹. I found that team meetings provided a rich source of ethnographic data. For one day approximately every month the team physically travelled to a location (which varies each time) where a meeting room was booked for a face-to-face meeting. Typically, the day involved presentations from group members, other people from TechnoCo or outside parties, along with discussion between group members of current issues, problems, projects and 'leads', or "burning issues" and "golden nuggets" as they were called.

I became involved (participated) in the meetings to a limited extent, but I mainly kept notes (observed) and socialised during coffee breaks, lunch breaks and social events after the meetings. I obtained permission to tape record one afternoon of a meeting, but the 'reaction' to the presence of the microphone was so significant that I decided in future to stick to keeping hand written field notes. I felt that the tape-recorder was making the participants feel uneasy and was disruptive to their meeting (see section 3.4 for further discussion of reflexivity and the 'reaction' to the tape recorder). I therefore made a situated decision to sacrifice the benefits of getting the detail of recorded conversation for the less detailed but less obtrusive method of note-taking.

⁹ Although they required physical travel to a field site, these team meetings invariably involved the participants using ICTs and entering 'virtual spaces'. This included working on electronic documents, making and receiving telephone calls, delivering Powerpoint presentations to clients, writing and receiving emails, and using audio-conferencing during meetings, and so on. The separation of the 'physical' and 'virtual' worlds is therefore a false distinction in this sense.

I also found that note-taking was more easily adaptable to the situation, which benefited my relationship with participants. For example, I would stop taking notes at significant points in the meeting and write up what happened later, such as when Eric dropped the 'bombshell' on the team that he was leaving. I felt that continuing to write at this moment would have been interpreted as 'rude' and 'inappropriate'.

The ethnography of everyday work, or 'shadowing' as I phrased it to the participants, involved observing whatever the team members were kind enough to invite me to attend. The 'shadowing' visits included observing participants working at hot-desks, lunches in various office restaurants, home office visits, client presentations and meetings, TechnoCo consultancy workshops, small intra-group meetings (a few team members together), meetings with people from other departments in TechnoCo, and so on. This diversity of 'shadowing' activities reflects the range of spaces in which team members conducted their work activities. I sought to experience a full range of work experiences of the team members in order improve my understanding of their working lives.

I also negotiated access to several monthly performance review meetings between team members and their supervisors (other senior team members), and four Annual Performance Review meetings, which occurred at the end of the financial year. These were important rituals where the performance, progress and personal development of the team members were discussed. Some participants refused to grant me access to observe their performance review meetings because they saw them as 'private' or 'sensitive'. For example, while undertaking several performance reviews in one day, Eric allowed me to observe the meeting

with Barry but not the one with Georgina because, as he explained, they had some 'sensitive' issues to talk about. This right to confidentiality must be respected, but the limited access must be assessed for its implications for my study. For example, it may be that I was only permitted access to events that were deemed 'positive' in content, and would be thought to reflect well in my research output.

Data capture during observation took the form of hand-recorded notes, written either at the time or shortly after the event (typically on the train or bus on the way home). I took care to write down as much as possible about the experience, including the setting, actions and mannerisms, content and style of speech, orientations of participants, and so on. On each fieldwork occasion I recorded the date, location and people present, and usually a sketch of the layout of the room including where people were sat around the meeting table and what technologies were in use. I tried not to be premature about deciding what was 'relevant data' and therefore attempted 'writing down everything' (Okely, 1994), or at least as much as possible. My notes therefore included conversations I had about participant's family and social life, for example, even though most of this data was not subsequently reproduced in this thesis.

Still, these physical spaces described so far do not completely reflect the participant's full range of work experiences. The team members used virtual media to communicate and conduct their work on a daily basis, in particular email and the (mobile and land-line) telephone. One regular and important use of the telephone was the weekly audio-conference. Every Monday morning the team dial a number using a landline or mobile to discuss their work activities of the previous and forthcoming week. The call was recorded each week, so that a team

member who missed the call itself could dial in to play back the proceedings using a security code. This was an invaluable function for data collection. Having negotiated access to the audio-conference, I was given the security code and could simply tape record the proceedings from my office using telephone recording equipment anytime after the event. I was therefore strictly an observer of the interaction and was not even present in 'real time'¹⁰.

Email was another technology FlexiTeam used regularly for keeping in touch and was ascribed great importance by team members. Aside from the personal emails team members sent to each other, the team used a group email distribution list to send messages to everyone on the team. I therefore sought to gain access to this source of data and successfully negotiated inclusion into the group email distribution list. My email address was simply added to the group list. I tended to receive only a few messages a day through this list - I did not of course have access to the other emails that team members would obviously exchange. Group emails often included attachments, which may be emails from other people, documents, pictures, websites etc. This audio-conference and email data, which did not require my physical displacement as researcher, constituted the 'virtual' aspect of my virtual ethnography.

This 'online' data differed from the necessarily selective and inaccurate hand written notes of the physical ethnography in the sense that interaction was recorded more completely and accurately (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)¹¹.

This recorded data on tape and email enabled the repeated and detailed

¹⁰ The finance team did not record their calls in this way, so to capture this data I also dialled in at the time, but did not participate (see section 3.3.5 for a reflection on this method).

examination of the events of interaction (Silverman, 1993). In addition, it enabled those reading the thesis to have direct access to (selected parts of) the data about which claims are being made, thus making the analysis subject to public scrutiny and alternative readings (ibid).

The limits to research access I faced means that most of the data collected was what could be called 'public' interaction in front of the whole team, as opposed to 'private' interactions occurring one-to-one between team members. Access to one-to-one mobile phone conversations would be difficult to obtain without sophisticated telephone recording equipment. Moreover, access to 'private' interaction was not forthcoming, for obvious reasons. This was also not an issue I 'pushed' with participants, anticipating the sensitive nature of the request. I did request access to study Duncan's email account on his laptop, but was refused access. I did not feel it was appropriate to ask participants to 'tap' their private phone calls. I was concerned this might have compromised my relationship with the team.

All research invariably tends to face limits to access, unless of course the ethnography is autobiographical. The ethnographer simply cannot be in all places at all times (virtually or physically). The problems arising from limited research access must be acknowledged. The absence of data about 'private' interaction is obviously a limitation of my study. I was not privy to the majority of what was said over email and the telephone, meaning my conclusions are based on limited knowledge of the lives of team members. My findings are based only on the data

¹¹ Audio recordings and emails are certainly not to be regarded as 'perfect' or comprehensive forms of data. Audio tapes can be inaudible and non-verbal gestures and who is being addressed can be lost (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Emails may also be incomplete if the observer is not privy to other private conversations by phone, email or in person that relate to the email in question.

I was able to collect, that is interaction in predominantly 'public' or 'front-stage' situations.

The interactions occurring 'privately' or 'back-stage' are not, however, to be regarded as somewhat more 'accurate' or 'true' reflections of the identities, motives and relationships involved. All interaction is a performance crafted through an interpretation of the audience and context, whether it is interaction with a colleague, the researcher or in front of the whole team. Moreover, this limitation to the data set need not be a drawback, given the focus of my study. In a study of a virtual *team*, the interaction of interest is precisely that which is occurring within the team as a whole. By focussing on a virtual team, as opposed to the individual teleworker, the forms of interaction occurring within the team generated data sufficient to address my research question.

3.3 Reflections on Virtual Ethnography

'Virtual ethnography' is a relatively new and unexplored methodological approach. The methodological issues involved in single-site, face-to-face ethnography are relatively well understood from the long history of anthropological ethnography. Yet in adapting to life in contemporary organisations by attempting a mobile, virtual ethnography, I seemed to face some distinctive methodological choices and dilemmas. It may therefore prove insightful to reflect upon my experiences of conducting a virtual ethnography. Indeed, some distinct methodological issues - involving research access, gaining trust, ethnographic learning, researcher identity and influence - arose from attempting to study the participants 'virtually'.

3.3.1 Research Access

I did not negotiate research access and entry to study FlexiTeam using virtual media such as the telephone or email. Although this will obviously differ for purely Internet-based groups (see for example Hine, 2000), I felt that face-to-face contact was the most effective medium for negotiating access with FlexiTeam. My decision to negotiate access face-to-face was partly circumstantial (I first met the team at a conference) and partly due to my personal 'intuitive' judgement about how best to proceed. For example, I arranged to meet Terry in at a London office face-to-face rather than discuss the proposal over the phone, and also met Duncan face-to-face at my own office to discuss the research proposal.

Interestingly, FlexiTeam themselves regard face-to-face contact to be the most effective method of communication. As Nigel commented in our interview, when I asked him to reflect on the use of different media:

“For you to come and do what you’re doing with the team, you spoke to Terry- I don’t know how it came about, but obviously you had a chat with Terry and were looking to do something, but you sold yourself to the team on that occasion. You did that not via email or a phone call, but face-to-face ... The chances are, had you tried to articulate what you said to Terry on that day in a letter: Dear Mr Bothwell, I’m a student, der der der, and I’m looking to do this der der der; or in an email, the response would have been something- a letter’s one thing, an email’s something else, a phone call’s something else, face-to-face is something different isn’t it? Totally different.”

In this case, the impetus towards 'virtualisation' may not extend to include the recommendation that the researcher attempts to gain access virtually. Team members were clear about their view of the “superior” qualities of face-to-face communication, just as they recommend regular face-to-face team meetings to their clients in their consultancy work. Reflecting upon my own actions, I chose

face-to-face contact because I implicitly felt it would help me make my case and establish 'trust' in the research relationship. In retrospect, by privileging this medium I may have enacted one of the assumptions about face-to-face contact found in the practitioner literature (2.1). It seems I also share this particular cultural value with FlexiTeam. The issue of 'trust' and face-to-face contact is explored next.

3.3.2 'Trust' and Rapport

Trust and rapport are both crucially important for ensuring that the ethnographer is admitted as a 'legitimate stranger' into the team. One incident that now enables me to reflect on the importance of having met face-to-face for establishing 'trust' in the research relationship occurred the day I first met Carol. I had arranged to shadow Ben while he spent the day 'hot-desking' at a TechnoCo office with Carol. Carol had said this was "OK" when Ben had mentioned it during an audio-conference earlier that week (I later played back the audio-conference and noticed this). However, when Ben and I arrived, I went to the toilet and on my return Ben told me he'd just been on the phone to Carol, whom he said had just expressed her apprehension about my visit. Ben told me that Carol was unhappy about my presence and wanted to know who I was and why I wanted to know about her job.

As with any first encounter with a participant, I was nervous about the first meeting in case participation was withdrawn, but this made me all the more anxious. Yet when she walked up to the hot-desks where Ben and myself were sitting, my anxiety was alleviated when Carol saw me and said "Hi! I remember you – we met at the Telework 2000 conference, right?". The research relationship

seemed to go smoothly from this point, and Carol actually became one of my central 'informants' during the study.

I learnt another valuable lesson about 'trust' when I attempted a formal approach to the issue by developing a 'code of ethics and confidentiality'. The reaction I received from the team is described in section 5.4. In short, the participants did not favour this 'formal' and preferred a more informal approach based on 'mutual trust'. The methodological lesson I learnt from this experience is that I should not have presumed before entering the field which approach would be best received by the participants. I should instead seek to adapt to the local values of the participants. In this case, FlexiTeam's discourse of 'trust' made a more informal, interpersonal assurance of confidentiality a more appropriate method of securing 'trust' from participants.

The level of rapport and acceptance established between participants and the ethnographer is always hard to judge. I did not physically participate in the team members' work-lives every day, as may be characteristic of workplace ethnography of a co-located team. The team members were geographically distributed across the country, making constant physical presence an unrealistic expectation for this 'virtual' ethnography. I simply could not be in ten places at once. It may therefore be expected that the level of rapport and acceptance would be limited by this restriction upon face-to-face contact.

However, the team members themselves did not work physically together every day. In fact, the team as a whole only meet face-to-face once a month at Team Meetings. In this respect, I may well have met with team members just as often as they saw their other team-mates. This may be contrasted with a co-located

team who have a long history of co-present interaction where the ethnographer may have to put in much 'face-time' to be considered 'one of them'.

My degree of acceptance as 'one of the team' was reflected in being firstly invited to sit round the same table in team meetings, then secondly encouraged to participate in the meetings, and finally being invited to the team's social events such as a 'end of year' go-karting event and a 'leaving do'. Indeed, I was referred to on occasions as "one of the team" and Martin told me I was to interpret the joking and 'ribbing' by the team as evidence of my acceptance into the team.

3.3.3 Ethnographic Learning

Given access to the team, and the necessary trust and rapport with participants, the process of ethnographic learning begins to take shape. Yet I experienced some particular challenges regarding learning about the culture a 'virtual' team. As a virtual ethnographer, I had to ask myself whether the most illuminating sites for such learning might be on-line or off-line? As described above, my methodological approach involved collecting data through both online and offline media. However, reflecting on my experience it seemed that off-line encounters, in particular the unstructured conversations during coffee breaks and over lunch, were the crucial sites for learning in this study. The reader may well notice later that the data reproduced in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 was collected predominantly during face-to-face encounters with FlexiTeam.

In fact, the conversations by email or during an audio-conference were almost meaningless to me without a basic understanding of what the team does, sourced mainly from face-to-face encounters. Opportunities for unstructured dialogue with

participants were crucial because they helped me to gather data about the 'background' behind a project, team members' opinions of their colleagues, or what a dispute was 'really' about. Even the agenda sent by email before my first Team Meeting was a mystery until someone told me what all the acronyms stood for – APs are 'action points', AOB is 'any other business', BD are 'business developers', differentiating half of the team from the 'consultants'.

As a matter of fact, very little interaction seemed to occur through the group email distribution list. It appeared to be mainly used for distributing information and documents and arranging times/places for face-to-face meetings. Learning through this medium alone may have resulted in an impoverished analysis. What is more, in this case I felt that the various media FlexiTeam use should not be artificially separated out for study by the researcher when they are experienced by participants as part of an ongoing and inter-connected stream of interaction.

For example, a debate that is initiated on email, commented on during an audio-conference and later brought up at a team meeting may not be best understood by studying just one media alone. By separating out one media for study, as is characteristic of studies of email in organisations for example, the ethnographer is unlikely to gain an understanding of the meaning and significance of the issue under debate. In this respect, where the analytical focus is on the lives of the participants rather than the use of a particular technology, I would argue for a 'holistic' approach to ethnography that seeks to gain access to as many of the media of interaction used by participants as possible.

In keeping with the preference (of both myself and FlexiTeam) for co-present interaction (see the comment by Nigel in section 3.3.1 above), I conducted all the

interviews face-to-face. Many researchers conduct interviews over the phone, and more recently using email. Notwithstanding the savings in terms of cost and time of such methods, I saw distinct benefits from interviewing participants face-to-face. The informal 'chatting' that invariably occurred before and after the conversation was tape-recorded proved to be an invaluable source of ethnographic data. Team members themselves often talked about the benefits of co-presence for gaining information. As Duncan reflected in our interview:

"Like doing this interview is more effective if we meet face to face as opposed to doing it over the phone. So if I'm gonna get some important information, I'd rather go into the city, just to get- even if it's just for an hour or half an hour, just to get that information, to sit down with that person and feel comfortable."

Thus even in a 'virtual team' the most important site for ethnographic learning may still be the traditional off-line, face-to-face encounter.

3.3.4 The Ethnographer's Identity - Participant or Observer?

Physical presence in meetings, as opposed to virtual presence on email for example, appeared to play a role in the social identity ascribed to me by the participants. During my introduction spiel at the first Team Meeting I explained my role as an observer, like a 'fly on the wall' – someone who would take notes but not interrupt the proceedings. This was a deliberate strategy to define myself as an observer until I had learnt enough to be comfortable with participating as a competent member.

However, I was soon invited to sit round the meeting table and given a 'slot' during the rounds of 'individual updates'. This made me feel not only pleased and

flattered to be included, but also a little uncomfortable and under pressure - not knowing what to say that would be relevant and useful to the team. My bodily presence at the table seemed to facilitate my redefinition as member/insider (participant) as opposed to non-member/outsider (observer).

Similarly, when Martin complained about my lack of participation and asked me to contribute more (see section 5.4), he referred to my presence at team meetings. The fact that I did not contribute to email discussions and did not even participate in audio-conferences was not challenged in the same way. 'Lurking' was not challenged in these environments separated in time and space and I could more easily observe and learn.

3.3.5 Presence and Researcher Influence

The lack of attention to my presence in the on-line environments has implications for the possible influence of my research activities upon the data collected. It is quite possible that FlexiTeam's awareness of my recording of the audio-conferences faded over time, offering as close to 'naturally occurring data' with minimal researcher influence as could be afforded by the study¹².

This experience was different with the finance team because they did not record the call themselves. Unlike my experience with FlexiTeam, where I could simply play back the proceedings (different time, different place), I therefore had to participate in the call (same time, different place) in order to record it. Yet when I participated in the finance teams' calls, the participants carefully attended to my

¹² The ethnography was not naturalistic in its approach, however. As a 'reflexive ethnographer' I recognised that my presence was significant in potentially shaping all classes of data. See section 3.4 on reflexivity for more discussion.

'virtual' presence. Julie in particular interrupted the flow of the conversation frequently to kindly offer me explanations of the finance concepts she thought I might not understand, such as the concept of 'working days'. My presence was clearly more acutely oriented to during the 'real-time' call than the pre-recorded call.

My virtual presence on email, whilst separated in time and space, seemed to influence the data I collected. More precisely, my *absence* may have been strategically selected by omitting my email address from the group list on occasions. For example, Ben told me a story of how he 'got in trouble' when an email he sent as a joke to Carol, who forwarded it to the whole team, was not interpreted as funny. He described how he received group emails back 'having a go' at him. After asking Ben to confirm that the disgruntled replies had been sent to the whole group, I wondered why I had not received them.

It may be that participants were consciously aware of my presence on the email distribution list and understandably had a practical interest in seeing themselves and their colleagues portrayed in a favourable light (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). My on-line presence may have influenced how participants presented themselves in ways similar to how awareness of the audience influences social interaction in co-present workplace ethnography. Therefore, reflexivity regarding the influence of the researcher remains an important element of interpreting data collected in on-line environments.

3.4 Reflexivity

To elaborate further on the issue of reflexivity, this section discusses in more detail the relationship between the researcher and the participants, along with the implications of reflexivity for the interpretation and 'write-up' of the data. This involves consideration of the influence of the researcher, issues of representation and the validity and reliability of the findings.

Reflexivity is a controversial and highly contested philosophical area, particularly debated in the field of Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. Against some of the strongest proponents of reflexivity (see for example Woolgar, 1992), there are those who dispute the value of stronger versions of reflexivity as a semantic game with little methodological benefits (Collins and Yearly, 1992). This section argues that there are distinct methodological benefits to be derived from engaging in a consideration of reflexivity, and discusses the (weak) version of reflexivity that is used in this thesis.

To start with researcher influence, reflexivity encourages the ethnographer to recognise that her presence is significant in shaping all classes of data, whether observation or interviews.

“This ‘reflexivity’ - the attempt to understand how one is oneself perceived and how this may shape the research - is an important component of what is otherwise a rather ‘naturalistic’ ambition of trying to observe social life as far as possible in the contexts in which it generally takes place.”

(Macdonald, 2001)

The presence of the researcher and her research instruments is therefore certainly not a natural activity that has no effect upon the participants. For example, I noticed a significant reaction when I tried to tape record the first team meeting. Participants were acutely aware of and affected by the act of being

recorded. Team members often spoke 'to' the microphone in front of them. For example, Georgina said "for the purposes of the tape, Darren now looks gobsmacked!". Later on Terry also jokingly told the microphone "for the benefit of the tape, Kevin left the room at 2.25". Barry also reflected upon the impact the tape recording had upon the team when Eric swore and apologised to the microphone:

Eric: "... we have done a lot of work and [partner] have done bugger all. Sorry [looking at tape recorder]"
Barry: "It's funny how people apologise to a mic but don't apologise to each other!"
[laughter]
Georgina: "I'm sorry microphone!" [laughs]

Participants constructed particular stories in the light of their awareness of being researched. They were no doubt aware of their particular organisational duty as representatives of both TechnoCo and the success of teleworking in general. An insightful reminder of this was Carol's comment at the start of our interview:

Researcher: "I've been through the ethics and confidentiality."
Carol: "Yes."
Researcher: "Is there anything else you need to know about that or/
Carol: "/no, no, not really. No, no, no, I mean I'm quite happy. I know what I should say and shouldn't say, sort of thing, anyway, and you know."
Researcher: [laughs]
Carol: "Do you know what I mean?"
[Both laugh]

Participants may have been aware of what they 'should and shouldn't say' given their role in the promotion of teleworking. The reader is advised to bear in mind the contextual nature of the data I gathered while interpreting the findings of this study. By studying a group of teleworking consultants, it is largely unsurprising

that the majority of the data I collected presented virtual teamwork as effective and successful.

Participants were also keen to perform the 'interviewee' role properly. Several interviewees asked "is that OK?" or "is that what you were looking for?" at the end of our interview. Interviewees were clearly keen to produce a story that they hoped would be what I wanted, even though I did not think I had any particular preconception about what was 'good' and 'bad' data. Participants' interpretation of 'what I wanted' seemed to shape the data collected during interviews, and at other times during my ethnography.

The interpretations of the researcher, in addition to those of the participants, are also significant in shaping the outcomes of the research. Ultimately, I played the central role in dictating what was recorded and how was interpreted. Furthermore, research is never 'theory free'. Researchers only view the world in a certain way because they "have adopted, either tacitly or explicitly, certain ways of seeing" (Silverman: 1993: 46). What data I recorded and how I subsequently analysed the data was highly influenced by both the epistemological perspective I was developing and the theories and approaches I was exploring through my reviews of various bodies of literature.

The written ethnography is a means of representation (Van Maanen, 1988). Language is not only central to the process of conducting ethnography, but is also central to representing this experience in the ethnographic thesis.

"If one recognises that meaningful social life is produced and reproduced through the use of language, then one must also realise that language is constitutive of how social life is represented."

As Silverman (1993: 197) states, “qualitative research can no longer concern itself with discovering truths which are unmediated by the situated use of forms of representation.” Reflexivity regarding representational practices is therefore important. Authors must be self-consciously aware of the literary conventions within which they write. Representations, including the ethnographic report, do not passively reflect the world ‘out there’ but actively construct it (Woolgar, 1988). This questions the authority of the scholar in generating scientific and factual accounts. Ethnography is instead seen as a “storytelling institution” (Van Maanen, 1995: 3).

For example, excluding the researcher from the text involves an uncritical reliance on conventional forms of representation. This can have the effect of making the research appear to have materialised without the involvement or influence of the researcher. Excluding the researcher also makes the thesis appear to be representing the same set of ‘facts’ about the field that any researcher could and would find. By ‘writing in’ the researcher, the ethnography appears as a situated and partial representation that is relative to the researcher’s position. The researcher offers a ‘view from somewhere’ rather than a ‘view from nowhere’ (Haraway, 1991). I have therefore tried to ‘write myself in’ when constructing the story told in this thesis. For example, interview quotes are introduced by stating that the data was gathered in an interview, to avoid the impression that the data extract was “naturally occurring” and gathered without my intervention.

Researcher identity was also important in shaping the development of the research. My embodied identity as a young, female researcher was significant in shaping where I went, whom I spoke to and what data I gathered. Gender, for example, closes off some avenues of research whilst opening up some others (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), such as conversations in the ladies toilets. FlexiTeam constructed a particular identity for me, which may have helped my research in some areas and hindered it in others. I felt almost 'adopted' by the team, which had both benefits and drawbacks in the level of expectations, access, respect and credibility I was accorded. For example, one team member referred to me publicly as "like a little sister, so we've gotta look after you".

Reflexivity also reminds the researcher not to assume a realist stance, where objects in the world are assumed to exist independent of her representation of them. No source of data offers a neutral or transparent representation of 'reality' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The ethnographer is not therefore simply a neutral machine for describing the facts of a culture to the rest of the world (ibid). Just as I maintained an ethnographic uncertainty about interpretations of the world prevalent within the culture, reflexivity enabled me to maintain this scepticism with regard to my own writing (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). Just as I relativised the participants' 'emic' account, so too must my own 'etic' account be treated as relative. Ethnographer's accounts should not necessarily be more privileged than those of the participants and are not immune from criticism (ibid). There may be many interpretations of an event or activity. The researcher's interpretation is not necessarily to be privileged. Accordingly, I attempt in the conclusion to consider some alternative, rival interpretations of the data presented in the thesis.

Without an attempt at some form of reflexivity, this thesis could be seen to involve an implicit claim that my research is immune from the sociological analysis I apply to FlexiTeam. To relativise the claims of others about a phenomena, but to deny the constructed nature of the authors' claims could lead to the accusation of 'ontological gerrymandering' (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). It also assumes that the researcher is neutral and has some unique access to the 'truth'. Woolgar (1988) labels this type of ethnography 'instrumental' and instead advocates a reflexive approach, one which investigates the ethnographer's own representational practices. Reflexivity reminds the reader that *all* texts are stories (Latour and Woolgar, 1986).

However, there are limits to the version of reflexivity presented in this thesis. I have not engaged in new literary forms, such as conversations between the author and other academics about the construction of the thesis. I have rarely diverged from the traditional reportage genre. My narrative does not aim to completely undermine its own argument, nor do I emphasise the constructed nature of my account as much as could be possible. I do not lead the reader to question the occurrence of the events I describe. Reflexivity is instead used in a more moderate way to inform my data analysis and remind me of the tentative nature of the conclusions that may be reached from my research. It is also used on occasions to remind the reader of the constructed nature of the thesis.

Nevertheless, engaging in a form of reflexivity is significant in its implications for issues regarding the reliability, validity and generalisability of the research. Starting with reliability, this involves the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions (Silverman, 1993). As discussed above,

reflexivity recognises that all accounts are local and situated, therefore cannot be universally 'reliable' in this sense. Another researcher would not collect the same 'facts' as me, nor will I analyse and represent my data in a scientific manner that could be programatically replicated. Rather it is reflexive analysis of the process by which I make inferences from my data that makes the analysis more rigorous. An account of the process of data analysis is given in the next section.

Moving on to validity, this refers to the extent to which an account accurately represents the phenomenon to which it refers. Reflexivity again questions the notion of a valid and 'true' representation. This assumes the researcher can gain access to the social world 'out there', unmediated by her position or view. This idea forms the basis of instrumental ethnography, which would claim, for example, to be unearthing what virtual teamwork is 'really' like through the 'more accurate' *in situ* observations of 'what actually happens' (Woolgar, 1988). A reflexive ethnography instead reminds us that all accounts are constructed.

However, there are also problems inherent in an interpretive ethnography where the researcher claims to be able to see the world from the participant's viewpoint. As Bryman (1988) suggests, the researcher can never be sure to have interpreted events correctly for their meaning. However, this is less of a problematic issue if ethnography is valued for offering a distinctly different view to that offered by the participants. Ethnography may not be so valued if it simply repeated the very same "emic" account the participant themselves could write. FlexiTeam are *themselves* effective enough at promoting their own view of virtual teamwork through conference presentations, websites and journalistic articles. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue, it is in the social and intellectual distance between the ethnographer (stranger) and participant (native) that the

analytic work of the ethnographer is done. Ethnography can be seen as fundamentally concerned with the *researcher's* interpretation of the participants' interpretations. Insight is derived from being at the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' (Bryman, 1988). This thesis thus aims to presents an alternative "etic" account of life in FlexiTeam, without laying claim to having discovered a more accurate, truthful and valid picture of team members' lives.

The issue of validity is therefore not in this case about claiming to have gained an 'accurate' appreciation of participant's view of the world. The criteria of validity used in positivistic methodology are therefore less appropriate in the case of this ethnographic project. The reader must instead judge how persuading the story is, how it accounts for the detail of the data, and if alternative meanings and understandings have been considered (Potter and Wetherell, 1994). The conclusion chapter (section 7.2) attempts this final aspect by reflecting on my data analysis process and considering alternative interpretations of my data.

Finally, the issue of the generalisability of ethnography is also a matter of much debate and critique (Hammersley, 1992). I do not claim to have generated findings from a typical case that are statistically generalisable to a wider population. FlexiTeam are certainly not representative of any 'teleworking population', not least because of their unique role in *selling* as well as practicing teleworking. The understanding generated by my research arose precisely because the social processes were understood in *context*. For example, this thesis argues that FlexiTeam's unique relationship with their clients played an important role in shaping their subjectivity. In another context, being a 'virtual team' may not even be an important organising concept for the employees in

question. Indeed, this appeared to be the case for the Finance and Government team I studied (see section 4.1).

Nevertheless, the insights derived from this research may well be of interest to other researchers of subjectivity in organisations, just as I found resonance within certain literature while I was struggling to interpret my data. The findings of this thesis are therefore of significance less for their empirical generality and more for their theoretical insight (Bryman, 1988). This relationship between my empirical data and theory is developed further in the conclusion chapter. It is argued that the theoretical relevance of my study might extend beyond virtual teamwork *per se* towards informing theory regarding subjectivity and discourse in general. Just as critical studies of work and organisations *informed* this study, it is hoped that this study will *contribute* to the development of this field of enquiry.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected during my ethnography comprised around 100 hours of recorded talk (interviews and audio-conference recordings), over 200 emails of various size and four notebooks of hand-written field notes, along with various items of documentation collected during the fieldwork period of around nine months. This thesis clearly could not reproduce this data in its entirety. As Silverman (1993: 39) reminds us, the critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate as much data as you can, but to 'can' (get rid of) most of the data you accumulate. A method of analysis was therefore required to categorise the data and draw out themes to be selectively represented in the thesis.

The aim of this section is to describe and reflect upon the form of analysis I actually conducted in the form of a 'confessional account' (Hughes, 1994), as opposed to an idealistic and mechanistic schema of how analysis should be done. This recognises the messy, unpredictable and often uncontrollable nature of qualitative data analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). This section aims to address Bryman and Burgess's (1994a) concern that authors rarely make it clear how issues or ideas emerge and are constructed into the finished written product.

In general, qualitative data analysis may be best described using the metaphor of a 'funnel', whereby the researcher progressively narrows down a highly open-ended data set into a range of selected themes or categories. Data analysis is not so much a distinct stage in the research process with a division of labour between the fieldwork and analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). The analysis is conducted by the ethnographer herself and relies heavily upon an iterative process of moving between the data, concepts derived from literature and the field.

The method of coding in qualitative research is not defined *a priori*, such as responses to a survey question along a Likert scale, characteristic of positivistic methodology. The codes are induced from and grounded in the data itself and are not merely quantified in the simplistic sense of counting responses to pre-defined questionnaire items. The results can be made more rigorous by examining both supporting and non-supporting data when developing an analytical code (Hughes, 1994). For example, the acceptance and internalisation of a discourse may be questioned in the light of data suggesting forms of subjective distancing from the discourse. In this thesis, the data presented in Chapter 5, which suggests that team members' subjectivity was normalised by the teleworking

consultancy discourse, can be contrasted with the data presented in Chapter 6 which suggests forms of ambiguous, contradictory and instrumental relationship to the discourse.

Finding the 'main story' of the thesis was not a technical task that could have been achieved through the programmatic application of a coding technique from which 'results' simply 'fall out' (Potter and Wetherell, 1994). I was lead down various 'dead ends' during analysis and was never entirely confident that I had selected the authoritative or definitive theme from my data. At no point was I satisfied that all data was grouped in 'the one final and correct way' and that another analyst would exactly replicate this grouping.

The data set I collected could easily have produced many different theses depending on the analytical theme chosen, such as knowledge sharing, trust or social isolation. It was nevertheless through immersion in the data and the constant adjusting, regrouping and redefining of the data that I was able to scrutinise and reflect upon the decisions I made. The written outcome of analysis therefore cannot be judged as to whether it is 'correct', but it can be examined for how convincing the story is and how well it accounts for the detail of the situation (Potter and Wetherell, 1994).

Qualitative data analysis can be dependent to a large extent on ideas and flashes of inspiration that lead the researcher to see her data in a new and interesting way (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). In the case of this research, two main influences can be identified. First, like Hughes (1994), my supervisors played an important role the construction of my thesis. From a somewhat more detached viewpoint, they were able to offer interpretations that my more involved eye could

not see. For example, the importance of FlexiTeam's role in practicing and selling teleworking was highlighted during my upgrade viva. Until this point I had been reluctant to discuss the team's role in the interest of preserving confidentiality. This aspect of the team went on to become a significant theme in my thesis as I began to consider the question - to what extent might FlexiTeam's role in selling teleworking be significant in shaping their experience of virtual teamwork?

Indeed, the biggest challenge I found during my research project was not how to find *answers* to pre-defined hypotheses but to search for the most insightful *questions* to ask of my growing data-set. The research questions with which I entered the field certainly did not remain unchanged. I sought to alter my research questions in order to make them both relevant given my interpretation of the participants' world-view, and significant as an academic line of enquiry.

Second, this change in direction also led to the exploration of a new field of literature, namely critical management studies. The concepts in this literature resonated with my fieldwork experiences and equipped me with new sensitising concepts with which to re-read my data. For example, the concept of 'career', which had been an initial focus of my research but one that I found difficult to 'impose' upon my data, began to gain a fresh analytical purchase in making sense of my data for reasons that were previously unexpected. Through my reading of new literature, such as Grey (1994), I was now able to see career as a discourse with disciplinary effects.

Both of these changes – a new research question and a new field of literature – occurred after data collection had been concluded and I had withdrawn from the field. Like Okely (1994) and Hughes (1994), conceptualisation was made after the

fieldwork. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the themes discussed in this thesis – subjectivity and normative control – were post-hoc emergent themes and therefore were not explicitly part of my data collection. Thus, team members were not directly asked to reflect upon the significance of both practicing and selling teleworking, for example, even though this aspect constitutes a significant part of the story told in this thesis.

Where analysis is divorced from the field in this way, the researcher must be careful about her claims to reflexivity. It is ultimately *my* reading of the data that is granted the authoritative voice in this thesis. However, re-reading my data in the light of this theme revealed participants reflecting upon this aspect of their working lives unprompted by the researcher. This delay in analysis is not necessarily a drawback of my study. This could be interpreted as demonstrating one of the benefits of qualitative research, in being open to important topics that were unanticipated by the researcher (Bryman, 1988).

The practical aspects of analysis involved particular methods of re-recording and coding the copious field-notes, emails and tape recordings. Increasingly popular for this task is the use of computer software to aid analysis, such as Ethnograph or NUDIST. I did not employ any such package, not for any methodological standpoint, but because this software was not publicly provided by the department. In any case, standard word processing software appeared to be adequate for my analysis task.

The first task of analysis was to store my data in a standard format in a central location on my computer, bringing together data from the dispersed locations in paper note-books, on tapes and in an email package. This enabled text to be

easily searched and transferred into the files that were generated for each theme. Therefore, field notes were selectively typed up, emails were 'copied and pasted' (in groups to preserve the 'thread structure' (Rudy, 1996) of the interaction), and tape recordings (of interviews, team meetings and audio-conferences) were transcribed into Word documents. By conducting these tasks selectively, that is by selecting at this stage what data should be typed up and which should not, this comprised the first stage in the process of analysis. For example, talk about participant's family and non-work events was omitted because this was not deemed relevant to the focus of the thesis at the time. It may be relevant to another analysis in the future, in which case the original sources can again be consulted.

In each file created by the initial typing up, the data was placed into a table with a column dedicated to my analytical comments on the data, from which the themes were developed. For example, talk about other team members was initially coded simply as 'intra-team' before this was elaborated into further themes such as 'requesting information from team-mate', 'praising team-mate', 'helping team-mate' and so on.

The tape-recordings were not transcribed in the greatest detail possible, using the exact words of participants including pauses, repeats and short utterances. Particularly the recording of audio-conferences and team meetings, where turns were often short and frequently changed speaker, the time-requirement of such detailed transcription was significant. Instead, I recorded the general themes and issues that were being discussed and included a table column dedicated to the exact counter location on the tape so I could return to the talk for more detailed transcription for the written thesis. Even this method entailed three months

dedicated to transcription before 'analysis proper' could begin. In retrospect therefore, I would have benefited from completing preliminary transcription and analysis in parallel with data collection in the field.

The three general codes I initially developed to categorise my data were those of 1) talk regarding the team, 2) talk regarding the organisation, and 3) talk regarding clients. This was based on my ethnographic experience of life with the team where I noticed that talk would often be about one of these three aspects of their work lives. Chunks of text from various contexts and sources were put under these headings, often combining a conversation in my field-notes, a comment during an audio-conference, an email debate and a team meeting discussion. Some pieces of data seemed relevant to more than one code and were therefore copied and pasted under more than one heading. This coding technique addressed the problem of how to 'mesh together' the diverse sources of data collected during the ethnography.

Analysis of the data within the three initial codes led to the elaboration of further themes, which were stored in new files within a hierarchical file structure. For example, from the data regarding the team I constructed nine further files into which I pasted text regarding their views of team meetings, technology, audio-conferences, the telephone, email, contactability, targets, travelling, and Terry. The reader will see a close resemblance between these themes and the various sections presented in Chapter 4. The rest of the thesis was subsequently developed by moving iteratively between the literature, the data and the emerging tentative conclusions, in close discussion with my supervisors.

To be clear, the data presented in this thesis is not to be regarded as ‘examples’ of a code consisting of many more similar examples. I did not select one quote which best illustrated the meaning of a category developed through the coding of many such instances. This method of analysis is perhaps more appropriate for the coding of a large number of interviews, often undertaken with the aid of computer software analysis packages. In the case of this thesis, the data presented constitutes by and large the entirety of the category I formed. For example, the data on FlexiTeam’s use of audio-conferencing presented in section 4.3.2 reproduces the entirety of the file I generated to hold data in this category.

The aim of this thesis is not to display data that is somehow ‘representative’ of a wider population to which it can be generalised. Rather, the aim is to convey to the reader a sense of what it is like to be a member of FlexiTeam. Some of the stories and anecdotes are indeed routine, everyday events that convey a sense of the daily life of team members. Other instances are more unusual or strange, and through their particularity also reveal something about the culture of the team. How representative this data is therefore becomes of less importance to the analysis than the relevance and meaning of the data, and the insight it offers into the culture of FlexiTeam.

3.6 Research Ethics

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) identify five main ethical considerations generally faced by ethnographers. These are informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research. This section discusses these issues with reference to my particular study.

3.6.1 Informed Consent

Every effort was made to follow the principle of informed consent, whereby participants grant their permission to be part of the study and are made aware of the aims of the study. I developed a 'code of ethics and confidentiality' that I always tried to discuss with participants before commencing the study (see Appendix 2). However, the point at which the study 'commences' is difficult to specify and written or oral consent was not always granted before I began collecting data on an individual directly or indirectly (such as through their manager).

Defining when consent had been granted for the study to commence was made particularly difficult by virtue of the team being 'virtual'. Consent was usually obtained through face-to-face contact (see reflections on virtual ethnography section 3.3), but this was difficult with a team who are geographically separated and rarely meet face-to-face. The study often 'started' before I was able to meet participants in person. In addition, consent is often not a totally 'free' choice for the individual to make. For example, where the team was contacted through their manager, the option to refuse participation could reflect negatively on the individual in the eyes of the manager, thereby increasing pressure to consent.

On a pragmatic level it was not possible to tell *all* the people implicated in the study *everything* about it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Research necessarily falls somewhere between the extremes of completely covert and completely overt (ibid). In any case, what I told different participants varied according to the current themes I was developing at the time. It also varied as to

the amount of time available and level of interest the participants expressed. For example, in the first FlexiTeam team meeting I attended I was actually stopped during my 'spiel' about consent and confidentiality, before I could even begin to explain what my study was about (see section 5.4.4).

Furthermore, explaining what the study was about could have influenced the participant's behaviour in ways that must be reflexively assessed. Participants were keen to help me with my study, perhaps to the extent that my explanation of what I was looking 'at' may have led to them interpreting what I am looking 'for'; thereafter offering me a suitable response. In addition, some people were involved in the research at the margins and may not have been aware of the study. For example, emails sent to the researcher often included copies of prior emails from individuals outside the studied group, including customers. Here it is taken that the 'code' extends to these marginal groups to protect their confidentiality.

3.6.2 Privacy

The privacy and confidentiality assured to participants in the 'code' (Appendix 2) is another ethical issue that was not clear-cut. In retrospect after writing this 'code', I might have been more careful about the level of anonymity I claim to offer participants. Nevertheless, pseudonyms are used in this thesis to replace individuals' names and efforts have been made to remove any other identifying information.

In cases where the comments made by participants are highly sensitive, or exclusion from the report has been requested, pseudonyms have been replaced

with anonymous numbers and the story edited to maintain gender-neutrality. In reflection, writing coherent sentences without reference to gender was an extremely difficult task, as the reader may well notice in Chapter 6. Yet this was an important task because, in such a small team, including references to 'he' or 'she' might have compromised the level of anonymity assured to participants.

Participants were permitted access to any written product should they wish to edit their information at any time. However, to ensure confidentiality, original data provided by one person was not available to anyone else. For example, managers would not be permitted access to interview recordings of subordinates. Some aspects of the data, such as the field notes, cannot easily be separated into the individual contributions to discussion. However, participants have not so far requested access to any data.

When undertaking organisational research, an additional pledge of confidentiality is needed with regard to the company. The company has also been given a pseudonym 'TechnoCo' and any business sensitive information, such as client names or financial data, has been removed. This information is not the focus of the research and its omission has not adversely affected the results of the study.

3.6.3 Harm, Exploitation and Consequences for Future Research

On the issue of harm, it is unlikely that participants experienced any physical or psychological stress through my research process. However, I must address the potential that the publication of my ethnographic account "may affect both the public reputations of individuals and their material circumstances" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 269). Certain conversations reproduced in this thesis, in

particular private comments that reflect negatively upon life in the team, could prove damaging to the informant's career prospects in the company or social position in the team. Hence additional measures to ensure anonymity have been made in such cases, by replacing their pseudonym with an anonymous 'Member1' and removing gender references, as described above.

Exploitation is unlikely to occur as a result of this research as the power relationship did not seem to be particularly skewed toward the researcher. Participants may well gain less from participating than the researcher gains, although there are usually benefits and costs involved in participating and neither can be measured conclusively (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Finally, the consequences for further research depend largely upon the reaction of the participants and the company to the findings. I have not yet been requested to present my findings, although I do intend to contact FlexiTeam to offer some feedback in return for the kind help I was given with my research. Even if the findings are not well received, I do not anticipate that future academic research will be rendered problematic.

Chapter 4. The Labour and Discipline of Virtual Teamwork

Introduction

This chapter begins with a story of the history of teleworking in TechnoCo, the birth of FlexiTeam, and an overview of the form of consultancy work they undertake (section 4.1). This aims to help the reader to appreciate the particular context of the team in question. The chapter then proceeds to present a 'scenario' of 'A Day in the Life of Barry' – a member of FlexiTeam - based on my ethnographic experience (section 4.2). This scenario is typical of the form of stories constructed about virtual teleworking in the academic and popular literature alike. The rest of the chapter then serves as a critique of this scenario (section 4.3).

In particular, the implicit assumption that teleworking is *flexible* and *effortless* is subject to critique using ethnographic data. This chapter therefore seeks to address the first research question:

1. What forms of labour and discipline on the part team members may be implied by these cultural changes towards 'best practice' virtual teamwork?

The story constructed in this chapter portrays the *labour* and *discipline* engaged in by team members regarding technology and knowledge sharing, audio-conferencing, the imperative to be contactable, email, phoning, team meetings and travelling (subsections 4.3.1 – 4.3.7 respectively). These themes strongly resemble the issues that were presented as crucial for the success of virtual teamwork in the practitioner literature (section 2.1). The chapter finally sums up

the main research findings that have been presented and poses a further question that arises from the findings presented in this chapter - the question of how team members' commitment to these practices are secured - to be addressed in the next chapter (section 4.4).

4.1 FlexiTeam in Context

This section introduces FlexiTeam by offering the reader a brief story of the history of teleworking in TechnoCo (4.1.1), the birth of FlexiTeam (4.1.2), and an overview of the consultancy work they undertake (4.1.3).

4.1.1 The 'Work-anywhere' Program

TechnoCo's relationship with teleworking began in 1992 when a small pilot scheme was set up in Scotland. Since then TechnoCo has established a large, if not the largest, formal voluntary teleworking scheme. 'Work-anywhere' now has over 5,000 employees officially registered as working from home. It was widely recognised that the main motivation for the scheme was to enable TechnoCo to rationalise its property portfolio, for example by reducing office space requirements and moving staff out of expensive locations such as central London. The business case for justifying the additional expense on new technology involved an estimated £180 million saving on property costs (source: FlexiTeam website¹³).

TechnoCo also claims that teleworking has enabled the business to increase flexibility, improve productivity, offer staff better work-life balance and contribute

¹³ Address withheld to protect anonymity.

to TechnoCo's environmental commitments through reducing commuting and pollution. In addition, as one manager pointed out to me, the rationale might also be to demonstrate how the ICTs the company sells can benefit organisations and individuals alike, in the service of promoting the sale of its technological products and services.

TechnoCo's commitment to teleworking involved not simply permitting employees to work from home. The 'Work-anywhere' program was presented as involving a systematic commitment to not just permitting but systematically *supporting* teleworking. This included the development of a web-based system to support employees and their managers through the transition, such as financial support for kitting out your home as an office and help regarding the legal aspects of the change. Supporting teleworking also meant massive changes to the company's property portfolio were needed. This included the restructuring office buildings to provide hot-desking, pre-bookable meeting rooms and café areas with laptop portals.

Teleworking is seen as one important component of the many changes occurring in TechnoCo as it strives to become an 'e-Company'. The ambition is for all the core organisational processes, from recruitment, HRM, learning, procurement and sales to be conducted 'virtually'.

4.1.2 FlexiTeam is Born!

Before they became an external consultancy team, the original members of FlexiTeam were heavily involved in the 'Work-anywhere' project based in the

Property department. Eric was particularly influential in the 'Work-anywhere' program – the program itself, he told me, emerged largely from the ideas he developed and 'sold' to senior management from his MBA project. As part of the 'Work-anywhere' team, Eric described how he was increasingly experiencing external companies approaching him for advice about implementing teleworking, having heard of their success with 'Work-anywhere'.

Based on this experience, Eric told me how he took a proposal to the TechnoCo division board suggesting FlexiTeam should be created – offering consultancy services to external clients for a fee, on the basis of their knowledge of and the success of 'Work-anywhere'. Eric proposed that consultancy could not only earn a fee, but more importantly could lead to the purchase of large quantities of TechnoCo technology. With senior management convinced, FlexiTeam was created and moved to the 'Business Sales' department to reflect its 'external client facing' role. Eric described how he created FlexiTeam in our interview:

“There was the MBA project that I sold to the company about Flexible Working basically. The 'Work-anywhere' program emerged out of that. Then we did lots of work within TechnoCo... launching a massive program, 70 people involved. Again, on the back of a big property project - moving out of London. Then in '97 we were doing quite a lot of work outside of TechnoCo. Clients kept coming to us, so we approached the TechnoCo division board and suggested that we could take this outside TechnoCo. ... I always wanted to run my own business. ... Effectively that's what I've done with this team. I've created it from scratch.”

From its origins with only a couple of members, FlexiTeam expanded its consultancy business and grew in size to (at the time of the research) comprise ten full-time employees. Members describe how they were recruited for the unique 'expertise' they brought to the team. Current members have backgrounds in technology, project management, sales, change management and human

resource management. All members are a professional/managerial grade. All members are, of course, themselves teleworkers.

FlexiTeam are therefore not identified as a 'team' in the sense that they are one of many teams created through a deliberate company-wide change program (as is characteristic of the literature in section 1.2). Rather, FlexiTeam are a team in the sense that they label themselves a team and strongly identify with this ascription. In so far as most of the participants of my study described their work group as a 'team', this could be seen as merely a reflection of the current popularity and appeal of the term.

Yet FlexiTeam were distinctive in the strength of their identification with the term. Furthermore, the organisation of their work did indeed seem to be premised upon interdependence through interaction, collaboration and knowledge sharing among a group of experts towards a common goal - the very features that were presented as defining aspects of teams in the literature (see section 1.2). The team-based organisation of their consultancy work shall now be described.

4.1.3 The Consultancy Sales Process

The FlexiTeam consultancy sales process can be seen as consisting of two stages, reflected in the two different job descriptions - 'Business Developer' and 'Consultant' - attributed to team members. However, each role is somewhat more blurred than this distinction suggests, with collaboration between team members occurring at all stages.

First, business developers engage in activities to promote teleworking, and of course the services of FlexiTeam, through conferences, press coverage and client prospecting. Most work comes in, so I was told, primarily through direct contact from clients who hear about FlexiTeam through conferences or by word of mouth from other organisations (or TechnoCo 'Account Managers', another important source of business).

Potential clients must firstly be convinced that they want to start a teleworking scheme. FlexiTeam see clients as having very different business drivers or 'hot buttons'. For example, some clients want to improve recruitment and retention, others want to merge two offices and close one down, others want to save on office space costs, and so on. Understanding and appealing to these 'hot buttons' is therefore vital in realising a sale.

Once convinced that they want a teleworking scheme, the client must then be convinced that they need to engage external consultancy help. This is a crucial point – teleworking must be presented as not only desirable but *also* problematic and difficult to implement. Confidence on the part of the client that they can 'do it yourself' is not conducive to consultancy sales. FlexiTeam rely on their experience with 'Work-anywhere' to convince clients that they have the necessary expertise to enable the client to implement teleworking 'successfully'. In short, FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse can be seen to consist of two inter-related elements:

- a) Teleworking is beneficial - given the client's business drivers;
- b) Teleworking must be practiced correctly - it requires FlexiTeam's expert advice on 'best practice'.

The content of part b) corresponds closely to the literature on 'best practice' virtual teaming reviewed in section 2.1 of the literature review. The particular practices FlexiTeam recommend are described in more detail later in this chapter (section 4.3).

The term 'teleworking consultancy discourse' is used from this point to indicate both these inter-related aspects of FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse. However, part a) tends to be somewhat taken-for-granted by FlexiTeam, and indeed by the client by virtue of engaging consultancy advice from FlexiTeam. Therefore, part b) is the most discussed aspect of FlexiTeam's consultancy work. Part b) is also the aspect that clients appear to be most concerned with, by virtue of engaging consultancy advice from FlexiTeam. Therefore this thesis refers more frequently to questions about what constitutes 'best practice' than whether or not virtual teamwork is considered beneficial. The latter is explored further in Chapter 6.

At the point where the client has 'bought into' this discourse and purchased a consultancy package, the business developer will usually 'hand-over' the client to a 'consultant' in the team. The second part of the sales process – the consultancy package - now proceeds. The consultancy package is 'modular' and depends on how many modules the client wishes to purchase. The modules are fundamentally *management* consultancy for teleworking. FlexiTeam do not advise on the technological aspects of teleworking. In fact, they refer the client to other parts of TechnoCo for these issues. FlexiTeam see themselves as engaged in the 'soft' issues of change management, and specifically refer to their role as engendering "culture change" in the client organisation. In this sense, this

ethnography is about attempting to understand and interpret the culture of 'culture managers' (Kunda, 1992).

FlexiTeam offer clients advice on developing a business proposal for teleworking, selecting staff, implementing a pilot project, training staff and managers and monitoring outcomes. The sort of tools FlexiTeam employ include space utilisation surveys, employee questionnaires, activity-based training workshops, focus groups and structured interviews. The 'best practice' they advise is based on their experience as a virtual team, their experience of the 'Work-anywhere' project, and knowledge from secondary literature, including academic research. This advice is not dissimilar to the practitioner-oriented literature on 'best practice' virtual teamwork reviewed in section 2.1.

The consultancy offering has been developed 'organically' by team members themselves over time. Senior management exercises little normative control over the content of FlexiTeam's tasks. The team are subject only to financial controls, through accounting measures disseminated in quarterly revenue targets. The normative control associated with the teleworking consultancy discourse, therefore, has developed from 'within' rather than being 'imposed from above'. This appears to be a significant issue in shaping team member's subjectivity, and is explored further in section 5.3.

4.2 A Scenario of Virtual Teamwork

The practitioner literature (section 2.1) described the many work practices recommended for 'best practice' virtual teamwork. Although the authors of this literature used some examples from case studies, the knowledge was generally

presented as an abstract classification of management processes. One of the challenges for my ethnographic research was to examine this knowledge in the light of my empirical data. In other words, fieldwork can 'bring to life' such academic knowledge about virtual teams and investigate how the various recommendations made in the literature might be implemented in practice.

This chapter shall therefore begin with a scenario constructed from my fieldwork with FlexiTeam that illustrates how team members may have experienced virtual teamwork. The scenario describes how the various recommendations of the literature – communication using ICTs, knowledge sharing, teamwork, targets – might be implemented in practice. The scenario is also written from the perspective of a team member (Barry), suggesting that the subjective experience of virtual teamwork is being appreciated.

A Day in the Life of Barry?

It's 8:20am, and Barry has just started work. He's at his desk preparing for a telephone call to the firm that are organising the big conference next week. He knows this conference is critical for FlexiTeam. They will be meeting potential clients to bid for several valuable consultancy projects.

His thoughts are suddenly interrupted. His wife knocks on the door and asks if he would like to say goodbye to the kids before she takes them to school. "I would never miss this part of the day!" Barry replies. You see, Barry is part of a 'virtual team' and works from his office at home. Starting work at 8am is easy for him now. He's always felt more productive and alert in the morning. Even more so since he's stopped having to make the hour-long journey to the office every morning. The 10-second walk to the spare room is a big improvement. And being there for his family is so important to him.

Barry offered to co-ordinate the conference because he has good links with the firm organising the conference, but he knows he cannot deal with the conference alone. There are so many clients to see in a single day. Besides, the research before the event and the proposal documents required afterwards are too much work for one person. His team-mates may be scattered across the country, but he knows they are there for him. Just as much as he would always 'go the extra mile' for them. He doesn't need to see them every day to be confident of this.

In any case, FlexiTeam have a range of technologies and work processes to make sure that being 'virtual' does not affect their effectiveness as a team. Being apart does not mean that team members are left 'out in the cold'. The synergies generated by team-working are not lost just because the team is virtual. This conference is proving to be a good example of how they all pull together to make being a virtual team 'work'.

Being miles apart does not mean that team members are out of touch with what is going on. Wherever they go, they take their mobile phones and laptop computers to keep in contact with the team and clients. To FlexiTeam, work is an activity, not a place. Barry can always reach one of his team-mates by email. Or he can send a message to the whole group by email - someone will always respond to a call for help.

Only yesterday Barry had received the list of clients they will be speaking to at the conference, so he forwarded an email to the rest of the team. He added that they needed to do some research into the companies listed to plan their 'pitch'. Four hours later Terry had already replied with a list of company websites and background information about their potential clients. The fact that Terry is based in Scotland was not a barrier to collaboration. With the Internet technology to support the team, Terry engaged in collaboration and team-working in spite of the distance. Terry in turn gains all the benefits from being 'part of the team'.

Barry always phones his team-mates, especially Terry, even if it's just for a chat. Nurturing relationships in this way is important for the success of FlexiTeam. Even if his team-mate is in a meeting, he can leave a voicemail message. His virtual team members may not sit next to him, but they are always contactable. Sharing an office is not essential - the technology is in place to enable and support virtual teamwork.

But communication is not just left to individual initiative. There are regular group processes that bring everyone together. The weekly audio-conference keeps everyone up-to-date with what team members are doing. Or they can arrange an audio-conference when a discussion is urgently needed but the team members are at different sites.

Just last week exactly this happened. Only three team members could make it to the West London office to work together at the hot-desks. But they were able to arrange an audio-conference between those co-located and those working from home that afternoon to discuss the plans and resources for the event. Barry sent an agenda to the group email list before the audio, and then an email with the actions and decisions afterwards. Audio-conferencing meant that unnecessary travelling time was avoided and the business goals were still achieved.

Working from home, or from a range of mobile sites such as client sites or company hot-desks, is ideal for those times when quiet work or client work is the priority. Yet there is also the monthly team meeting for those all-important face-to-face discussions. The team know that they have the opportunity to debate issues and build relationships and trust at these events. They often involve an overnight stay and some drinks in the evening. Because the social side of work is important too!

Tacit knowledge exchanged on this informal level is reinforced by the more formal database system. Team members can update the client portfolios on the database from any location through their Intranet connection. This way other team members can instantly access their knowledge of the client. Having employees out of the office does not mean that they take their knowledge with them. FlexiTeam use groupware technology to facilitate knowledge sharing.

In addition to technology, FlexiTeam have a robust management process that keeps them focussed in the right direction. Bonus-related targets ensure that dispersed team members keep focussed on the right tasks. Through managing-by-objectives, the distance manager can keep track of the team members' progress without having to 'look over their shoulder'. Trust, empowerment and reward prove to be far better motivators than mistrust, surveillance and punishment.

The targets do not mean that team members not encouraged to work as a team. They also have to achieve

targets as a team to receive part of their bonus. This creates a team atmosphere whereby members work together to solve problems and all contribute to team projects. This conference Barry is coordinating is proving to be a good example. Simply because the team members do not sit next to each other does not mean they are less of a cohesive team.

It is team-working that leads to success at events like the conference next week. They must all work together to give the best service to clients - no individual could achieve this alone. And with the technologies and processes in place to support them as a 'virtual' team, Barry is confident that when they come together they will be just as successful as any 'real' team.

4.3 A Critical Ethnographic Perspective

The 'scenario' above is not dissimilar to many accounts of virtual teamwork found in the popular press. Indeed, FlexiTeam are themselves often involved in writing such articles for journals and newspapers, often in response to wider 'stories' such as a fuel strike, public transport crisis, technological innovation or work-life balance policy. The scenario presents a particular perspective on virtual teamwork that emphasises the 'effortlessness', flexibility and multiple benefits, both for the organisation and individual, to be derived from the new way of working. It constructs a particular genre of discourse that involves all the prescription detailed in the practitioner literature on 'best practice' virtual teaming (section 2.1).

If the reader was convinced by the scenario, this may be testimony to the power and unproblematic status attached to this genre of discourse about virtual teamwork. Although apparently written from the perspective of a team member, the scenario presented a particular version of the virtual teamwork story. Virtual

teamwork was presented as universally beneficial and successful – a ‘win/win situation’. Like other forms of writing that originate from the political viewpoint of advocating virtual teaming, alternative accounts are often marginalized and omitted.

However, my ethnographic research has enabled me to critically explore what work processes remain taken-for-granted and invisible in such promotional accounts. My fieldwork experience has enabled me to question the assumptions implicit in these popular accounts of virtual teamwork. In particular, I am able to interrogate the notion that virtual teaming is ‘flexible’ and ‘effortless’. This section therefore constructs an alternative critical account of virtual teamwork in FlexiTeam.

Contrary to the notion that virtual teamwork enables new forms of work *flexibility*, my ethnographic experience has enabled me to construct a story about the rigid *discipline* enacted in order to maintain cooperation within a dispersed team. The story presented in this chapter also depicts the considerable amount of additional *work* the FlexiTeam members exert to ensure that the team works together even while apart. This finding seems at odds with the commonplace understanding of virtual teamwork as being *easy* to co-ordinate by virtue of the use of supporting technology. This suggests that the taken-for-granted notion that *technology* is the enabler and supporter of virtual teams must be interrogated. The ethnography illustrates the processes by which *team members themselves* often engage in labour that supports the technologies they use.

The following sections attempt to build this alternative picture of virtual teamwork involving forms of labour and discipline on the part of team members. The themes

developed mirror those aspects recommended in the literature review on 'best practice' virtual teaming (section 2.1) and those described in the scenario above.

4.3.1 Technology and Knowledge-Sharing

Most popular accounts of virtual teamwork generally accept the notion that it is *enabled* and *supported* by ICTs. These accounts emphasise the decisive role technology plays in making these novel work arrangements possible and supporting the everyday working lives of virtual team members. Similarly, the review of practitioner literature (section 2.1.3) suggested that knowledge sharing was important for virtual team success, and that technology plays an important role in this process.

Indeed, the scenario presented above described how Barry was supported by his laptop, mobile phone, email and audio-conference technology. I quote:

"Sharing an office is not essential - the technology is in place to enable and support virtual teamwork."

However, the notion that *technology* supports virtual team members is scrutinised in this section using ethnographic data that reveals practices suggesting the reverse relationship: *team members* themselves engage in work effort to support the technology. It is argued that the forms of labour on the part of team members, shaped by the ideal of seamless access from 'anywhere-anytime', appear to construct FlexiTeam's performance of virtual teamwork.

Team members appeared to be well aware of this labour but were reluctant to acknowledge its significance in their public accounts, lest virtual teamwork be

portrayed as less than seamless and effortless. This section describes their labour with regard to one particular technology that was introduced to support knowledge sharing – their client database – in order to highlight the effort that they exert to support this technology.

Problems with technology were a more or less daily annoyance for FlexiTeam. For virtual team members, who rely heavily on technology to do their job, such failures often were of major concern. It seemed almost every day I spent with FlexiTeam I was being told how unusual it was that some item of hardware or software was not working because ‘it’s supposed to work’. Common causes of complaint were projectors in meeting rooms that failed to show a picture, disk drives that would not connect, or files that did not seem to want to open or transfer. In each case considerable time was devoted by a number of individuals to solving the problem. Though in some cases those involved decided simply to ‘give up’.

One persistent technological problem I observed during my fieldwork concerned the client database. ClientInfo was a software application stored on FlexiTeam’s shared computer drive that held details about prospective and existing clients. The database was intended to capture the knowledge of team members and make it available to other dispersed team members regardless of location. The database stored details of which team member ‘owned the relationship’, details of past visits and conversations with the client, names of contacts within the client organisation, plus a ranking system for categorising the client as ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ with respect to the likelihood of purchasing consultancy services. The database was seen as a classic example of technology used to support virtual teamwork. As described in the scenario:

"Team members can update the client portfolios on the database from any location through their Intranet connection. This way other team members can instantly access their knowledge of the client. Having employees out of the office does not mean that they take their knowledge with them. FlexiTeam use groupware technology to facilitate knowledge sharing."

However, my fieldwork gave me insight into another aspect of this seamless, effortless and technology-supported knowledge-sharing scenario. I expected to see, and did indeed observe, considerable labour on the part of team members to keep such knowledge sharing databases up-to-date. Managerial control strategies - such as the team leader sending emails to urge team members to update the database each month - were also observed. The form of labour I did not anticipate observing was the more fundamental problem of getting access to the database. Yet during my fieldwork period the problem of getting everyone access to ClientInfo and ensuring they could update the shared copy (known as 'synchronising') seemed far from straightforward.

The first team meeting I attended in Reading (which I tape recorded) made me aware of the ongoing work undertaken by team members for the purpose of accessing ClientInfo. The debate centred around Georgina in particular because one of her five 'individual objectives' for the year included the responsibility for ensuring that ClientInfo was up-to-date and accessible by all members. Georgina had emailed the team instructions about how to access and update ClientInfo before the meeting. The discussion about ClientInfo began when the chairperson Nigel read out the action point from the last meeting:

1 Nigel: *"ClientInfo database. Georgina said don't touch it until she's*

emailed the team to say it's safe."

2 Georgina: "I did, and then you broke it! [laughs]"

3 Nigel: "Who broke it? Is there one person responsible?"

4 Georgina: "[clears her throat] Right."

5 Eric: "Go on, name and shame!"

6 Georgina: "The evil one! [laughs] Erm, no I'm not going to. It's now set up again but on the G drive. I sent an email out saying how you can download a local copy and synchronise it. You can't do it [looking around table], you can't do it, Kevin physically can't, but you can.'

7 Carol: "I can't get onto G drive."

8 Eric: "I'm sure you can get access to the G drive."

9 Georgina: "You can."

10 Terry: "Have you got Novell Netware?"

11 Nigel: "I haven't got Novell Netware."

12 Terry: "Are you on Windows 2000 or 98?"

13 Georgina: "You need briefcase"

14 [inaudible overlapping talk]

15 Carol: "I got as far as 3 quarters of the way with your instructions, but it wouldn't come up with the option to copy."

16 Georgina: "But you just said you couldn't get access to the G drive but if you"

17 Carol: "No, it wouldn't let me in."

18 Georgina: "So how did you get half way through?"

19 Carol: "I don't know."

20 Eric: "Can't it go onto the FlexiTeam account?"

21 Georgina: "No, it can't. The problem with it being on outlook"

22 Eric: "If it was on FlexiTeam yeah, [pause] if I open it, can I open it as a FlexiTeam account owner?"

23 Georgina: "You say on the FlexiTeam, the FlexiTeam what?"

24 Eric: "The email account."

25 Barry: "The email account."

26 Georgina: "Well then there's no point, there's no difference it being on FlexiTeam email account to being on the shared folders."

27 Eric: "It's not, cos at the moment the problem with it being on share folders is that if Terry opens it and doesn't close it"

28 Terry: "Excuse me, I do! Hypothetically!" [laughter]

29 Georgina: "Somebody opens it and doesn't close it. OK. Somebody opens it then turns their machine off. OK. That's what they do [glares at Eric] [laughs]"

30 Eric: "Whereas if FlexiTeam opens it [pause]"

31 Georgina: "And then it's sitting on the. Oh, I don't know."

32 Eric: "I don't know, but it's the fact that it's the email account opening it, or whether it's the local access opening." [others

- are talking in background]
- 33 Georgina: *"I think if you open it even if it's, WHEREVER [raises her voice to be heard above others talking] it is I think opening it on outlook wherever it is it will open it to a temp file"*
- 34 Barry: *"yeah, that's right, it will open it to a temp file so that only one person can access it at a time."*
- 35 Georgina: *"I can put it back on outlook and make it so that only one person can actually physically open it at a time. But it will still be slow to open, it will still be slow to close. So if you're gonna turn off your machine before it's downloaded back into the system, you'll kill it! Cos you won't let anybody in."*
- 36 Kevin: *"I think that's a retrograde definitely. Where it is at the moment on the LAN"*
- 37 Martin: *"for Nigel or those of us who can access it at the moment it's fine."*
- 38 Kevin: *"I have a problem with the fact that, being in a building - when I was at the Birmingham Office I made sure that one of the things I do when I'm in the building is to access the ClientInfo database."*
- 39 Georgina: *"If you like, I can work on a version where you can work on a local copy and you can"*
- 40 Eric: *"It means coming to a building."*
- 41 Terry: *"You can still open it on your G drive can't you?"*
- 42 Eric: *"I haven't got G drive access at the moment cos I've got windows 2000 because we haven't got briefcase."*
- 43 Terry: *"Which means you can't synchronise, but you can still open it, which is no slower than opening it on outlook."*
- 44 Georgina: *"No, it's a bit faster"*
- 45 Terry: *"It's faster probably from G drive."*
- 46 Barry: *"We could still do the reports off the G drive."*
- 47 Terry: *"Yes, you should work on it just as if you were in outlook. All your not getting on it is the synchronising."*
- 48 Georgina: *"You don't get to keep a local copy which you can just ping open."*
- 49 Terry: *"It's a pain, cos you have to be on a network."*
- 50 Georgina: *"Do you want me to do a session on this? When we've done the action points?"*
- 51 Eric: *"Do we think this is the right strategy? Cos I thought we were trying to get everything onto that one source. That's what we started off as doing in the first place."*
- 52 Georgina: *"Yes, but there are limitations with what happens with outlook"*
- 53 Eric: *"Closing intranet sites, closing G drives, going onto shared folders. [pause] OK, we'll do that."*

- 54 Terry: *"A pragmatic way if we were stuck, I know it's not ideal and it goes against the way we opened them, we could literally send round a voicemail saying can someone online mail me a copy of the database, you'd get it in 10 minutes. I know you couldn't send me one at 10 o'clock at night, but if you had an inkling at 5 o'clock."*
- 55 Georgina: *"I wouldn't dwell on this anymore"*
- 56 Terry: *"It was certainly good to get shot of the web stuff that was gonna cost us."*
- 57 ? *"Oh, yeah."*
- 58 Eric: *"It's great, I mean, in terms of having one place where you can update your ClientInfo, your timesheet, give you a list of accounts, all that type of stuff. It was brilliant."*
- 59 Terry: *"It's still there, it's just you getting access to it!"*
- 60 Martin: *"It is quite good actually"*
- 61 Eric: *"It's alright I can update it anyway."*
- 62 Terry: *[over others talking] "But you could open it anyway and work on it on the G drive"*
- 63 Eric: *"I can, I just need to go into a building"*
- 64 Georgina: *"So who needs to get access to the g drive?"*
- 65 Eric: *"I do."*
- 66 Nigel: *"I do."*
- 67 *[more discussion about getting access and the software they use]*
- 68 Eric: *"There was no reason for me to get onto a LAN ever, until now!" [laughter]*
- 69 *[more discussion about getting onto LAN]*
- 70 Martin: *"The short term solution, if you want to see it, just get someone online to send you a copy of it, and you'll get it in an email and you'll have the latest copy."*
- 71 Terry: *"And once a week post a copy on the shared folders for those that need access and then synchronise."*
- 72 Nigel: *"We all know we need to do that? Is everyone happy with that?"*
- 73 ? *"Yep."*
- 74 Nigel: *"Right, next item then ..."*

The first interesting observation from this extract is the length of the discussion. The debate lasted over twenty minutes (some parts of the transcript have been omitted) and surrounded the issue of making the database accessible 'anywhere' for dispersed workers – being in an office on the LAN was deemed not a problem.

Progressively more team members got involved to exert considerable collaborative effort in order to find solutions to support the database that is supposed to support them. For example, during turns 7-19 Georgina, Terry, Nigel and Eric all collaborate to diagnose and advise on Carol's problem of not being able to access the G drive. The problem is left unresolved in Carol's final utterance "*I don't know*", and the conversation moves to Eric's proposed solution of moving the database to their email account.

A second observation is that no agreed solution to the problem was accomplished in this time. The two solutions put forward – updating ClientInfo while at an office (turns 38, 40, 49, 63) or asking a colleague to email a copy (turns 54, 70, 71) – fail to meet their standard of supporting 'working anywhere'. Eric makes an ironic comment about how he was free to 'work anywhere' until the database required him to be in an office (turn 68): "*There was no reason for me to get onto a LAN ever, until now!*" Terry also concedes that "*it's a pain, cos you have to be on a network*" (turn 49).

Still, team members currently without access conclude that they must either undertake this additional workload of travelling to a company office, or rely on a team-mate who has got access to undertake the additional work of emailing them a copy and then updating it. These attempts at 'muddling through' and 'getting by' given the 'failings' of the technology reveal a different side to the supposedly seamless and effective support offered to virtual teams by technology.

A third observation concerns the way FlexiTeam construct their effort towards supporting the technology as both necessary and worthwhile. The team make pains to re-iterate the value of the database in spite of its failure to perform at the

moment (turns 56-61). In doing so the team members seem to be attempting to rationalise the effort exerted now (in the lengthy diagnosis, debate and prognosis) and in their 'temporary solutions' (going to an office or asking a colleague for a copy) as essential if their wider ideal or "*strategy*" (turn 51) is to be met.

Although a solution was suggested that meant only one person at a time could access the database (turn 35), this was rejected because it would compromise their vision of seamless and uninhibited access to the database from any location (turn 36). Terry explicitly labelled his solution "*pragmatic*" and "*not ideal*" (turn 54). Martin agreed with Terry's suggestion but again emphasised that it is to be regarded as "*short term*" (turn 70). These comments could perhaps be understood as constructed to avoid threatening the team's fundamental understanding that technology 'supports' anytime-anywhere access for virtual teams.

This story about the ClientInfo database does not conclude with a tale of how their work achieved a solution to the problem. In the audio-conference three weeks later Georgina was again engaged in a conversation with Carol about her access problem. Carol explained that she got through to the last instruction before she encountered problems:

- Carol: *"I got an error message saying Microsoft Access cannot complete this operation because it cannot find [pause]"*
- Georgina: *"Your briefcase?"*
- Carol: *"Or initialise a dynamic link."*
- Nigel: *"Georgina's gonna be busy today!"*
- Carol: *"Is that a briefcase thing, or?"*
- Georgina: *"Eugh, I'm not sure, have you got briefcase on your desktop Carol?"*
- Carol: *"Erm, would I find that under er?"*

Georgina: *"If you just look on your front screen, you should have a little suitcase there"*
Carol: *"I have, yes I have."*
Georgina: *"You can do it by just dragging and dropping it."*
Carol: *"Right, I've saved your message, so, I'll try that shortly after the audio."*

On this occasion the team members were physically dispersed, so Carol took the opportunity to ask Georgina for help regarding ClientInfo during the weekly team audio-conference. Nigel appeared to recognise the additional work implied for Georgina in attempting to solve Carol's problem in his joking comment. In fact, the problem did not seem to be subsequently solved. Georgina then arranged to present an agenda slot dedicated to ClientInfo at the next Team Meeting in Milton Keynes.

At the team meeting, Georgina showed the step-by-step instructions she originally emailed to the team by connecting her laptop to the projector screen. At the end of the meeting I 'hung around' while Georgina stayed late to help Barry with his persistent problem. She kneeled in front of his laptop in the hot-desk area and tried to load up 'briefcase'. While Georgina was busy moaning about his laptop being 'slow', Barry commented that it took him 45 minutes to get onto the LAN and technical problems have meant he had been unable to do any work for the last two hours.

We sat around chatting until Georgina finally stood up and exclaimed "*I give up*" – 'briefcase' was painfully slow loading and had now crashed. They were still working on the problem when I left to catch my train, although I did see Barry the next day to interview him. I asked him if they managed to get the database sorted in the end? Barry told me they did manage it, but only after they corrupted the shared copy and put that right. His response to my question "*what time did you*

managed to get away yesterday?” summed up his frustration: “you don’t want to know!”.

Yet the problem was apparently not solved for good. Barry’s problems were again brought up in the audio-conference a week later. Georgina describes one of her tasks for the day as ‘sorting out’ Barry’s ClientInfo problems. She makes light of the stress and hard work they faced after the Team Meeting by sarcastically describing it as ‘fun’:

- Georgina: *“I hope to try and sort out Barry’s version of the [client database] cos we had fun didn’t we sweetie? ...”*
- Barry: *“... Yes we did have some fun ...”*
- Georgina: *“[laughs] It’s still not working for poor old Barry, erm those of you who/”*
- Barry: *“/but it is updated though isn’t it?”*
- Georgina: *“Yeah, hmmm.”*
- Barry: *“Finally.”*
- Georgina: *“Did it do it?”*
- Barry: *“Well, um, I did my timesheet with you but it, it, the one on the shared drive is updated with all my [clients].”*
- Georgina: *“Yeah, I’m just trying to think if you over-wrote the um”*
- Barry: *“Well that was my fear, but I dunno how I/”*
- Georgina: *“[laughs] /the issue is that Barry doesn’t have the same commands as I get when I do it, do the synchronisation through Access, cos I get an option to merge it but Barry only gets an option to overwrite it, so [pause] erm, [clears throat]”*
- Barry: *“Or do something called ‘skip’.”*
- Georgina: *“Or do something called skip, so.”*
- Terry: *“Oh, right, um.”*
- Georgina: *“Barry you were gonna give the helpdesk a call and see if they had any ideas.”*
- Barry: *“I did on Friday night. Less than helpful, and more like a desk!”*
- Georgina: *“Oh, right. OK. I dunno, dunno.”*
- Barry: *“I’ll have another go today.”*
- Georgina: *“OK.”*

Unable to resolve the problem together, the two colleagues resort to enrolling outside help in the form of an IT support help-desk. Still unresolved, Barry decides to try again that day.

This story describes over a month of effort put in by Georgina and her colleagues to make ClientInfo 'work'. Supporting the technology required a substantial amount of time and effort on the part of the whole team – prolonged debate at the team meeting, more troubleshooting during the audio-conference, an entire agenda slot at the next Team Meeting, followed by a late night at the hot-desks, then a call to the IT help-desk. After all this work, the problem apparently remained. This story of everyday life as a FlexiTeam member stands in sharp contrast to the images of having your life as a virtual team member made easy through the support of technologies such as ClientInfo, as depicted in the scenario (4.2):

"FlexiTeam use groupware technology to facilitate knowledge sharing";

and in the practitioner literature (2.1.3):

"These systems are thought to enable virtual teams to possess 'knowledge repositories' that store the 'corporate memory' of the group"
(Haywood, 1998)

The irony of the story is that ClientInfo, far from enabling dispersed working, became one of the reasons for them to come together to an office.

To be sure, frustrations with technology may well be part of the experience of many workers, who may not even be part of a virtual team. The point is not that this story is somehow unique. The interest lies in how this story contrasts with the

promotional accounts generated by actors such as FlexiTeam. These accounts often 'hide' stories about the frustrations of technology and portray virtual teamwork as effortless, seamless and supported by technology. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, this is precisely how FlexiTeam portray virtual teamwork to their clients. As we will see in section 5.2, this story of the labour and frustrations of trying to access ClientInfo is *deleted* from the account Barry offers to clients when trying to sell FlexiTeam's consultancy services.

Another technology widely regarded as 'enabling' and 'supporting' virtual teamwork is audio-conference technology. Indeed, this technology was both widely used and highly regarded by FlexiTeam. Yet my ethnographic experience of studying FlexiTeam suggested that specific forms of work discipline on the part of team members played a crucial role in supporting this technology. Again, the story constructed from my ethnography describes the labour and discipline sidelined from popular accounts, including those produced by FlexiTeam.

4.3.2 The Audio-Conference

"That discipline of the Monday morning audio-call... Half hour well spent."

(Nigel, interview)

One process that is particularly valued by FlexiTeam is the audio-conference held every Monday morning¹⁴. All team members dial a conference call number at the specified time to participate in the call. The discussion generally lasts around half an hour. The conversation primarily consists of each member detailing the work they did the previous week and their plans for the forthcoming week. The audio-

conference is one central aspect of what was described in the scenario as “regular group processes that bring everyone together.”

FlexiTeam also pay [from their team budget] to have the call recorded with a facility to play back the call from any telephone at a later time. This is done, I was told, so that those team members unable to join the call can still listen to the proceedings when they are free. It also served the invaluable purpose of enabling myself as researcher – given the access code – the ability to listen to and tape record the audio-conference each week from my office without having to participate at the time.

Team members generally viewed the audio-conference as an important disciplining process that ensures they act as a co-ordinated team while apart. Darren explained how FlexiTeam developed the process of holding audio-conferences as part of their ‘learning curve’ of how to make their dispersed team ‘work’:

“It’s not left to chance so much [now]. Back then we didn’t have regular audios, to pull everyone together and find out what everyone was doing.... It’s come on leaps and bounds, there was a learning curve there...”

During our interview, Nigel reflected on how he felt the team benefited from the ‘discipline’ of the audio call. The interview was actually conducted after Nigel had left FlexiTeam and started working for another team in TechnoCo. Nigel informed me that, such was his satisfaction with the weekly audio-conference process, he was going to suggest to his new team that they set up the same process.

¹⁴ Other dispersed teams in the company tended to hold audio-conferences on a more ah-hoc or as needed basis, as opposed to the weekly ritual of FlexiTeam. The recording of the conference also did not appear to be a particularly widespread practice.

“I will be suggesting that we have weekly audio-calls. Some of the good stuff from FlexiTeam. When you are in isolation and occasionally only work with 2 or 3 in the group, a month in between Team Meetings, and you don’t have audio-calls, you’ve got no necessary reason to speak to others. That discipline of the Monday morning audio-call can be- it doesn’t have to be pure business, it can be a two minute ‘What have you been up to?’ ‘What did you do at the weekend?’. Half an hour, 2 minutes each. Half hour well spent. I think.”

Similarly, the scenario (4.2) presented audio-conferences as an easy and effective method of keeping the team connected while apart. Yet there are forms of discipline required of team members in order to achieve an effective audio-conference. The practitioner literature (see section 2.1.2) suggested that, indeed, greater discipline may be required in virtual teams:

“Co-located teams may be able to get away with casual or sloppy meeting management practices; distributed teams don’t have that luxury.”

(Haywood, 1998: 49)

The most obvious form of discipline practised by team members is to ensure that, regardless of other work activities they are engaged in, they dial in at the correct time for the call. Absence did not go unnoticed, and a ‘good reason’ involving client duties and ‘apology for absence’ was usually required. I was afforded more flexibility than team members by virtue of being able to dial into the recording at a time convenient to myself in the next few days. The discipline exercised by team members in order to participate in audio-conferences sometimes involved calling on a mobile telephone while travelling to a client site or company office.

A common practice was also to engage in the dual workload of simultaneously listening to the call while using the computer to carry on other work-tasks. Here

team members take on-board the dual obligation to complete their individual workload but also perform as a 'team player' by participating in the call. Team members use the 'mute' or 'secrecy' function of their phone when the work-task or travelling being conducted simultaneously may be noisy and would create 'background noise' for other call participants. I first became aware of this practice when Martin accounted for his delay in taking up his turn when nominated by Carol:

Carol: *"Right, I nominate Martin"*

[pause]

Martin: *"Right, I've just un-muted. Last week, two days in Scarborough..."*

Team members practice many subtle forms of self-discipline during the audio-conference. Participants tend to act in respect of the norms¹⁵ of the audio-conference by keeping their talk short and concise to avoid the call 'dragging on', in respect of the workload of others. Participants also demonstrate acute audience awareness by restricting their talk to the topics deemed relevant to the group. This was evident on the occasion that Georgina and Kevin ended up as the only participants left in the call, much to their amusement. The pair still agreed to act 'properly' and 'do the business' of the call and take turns at describing their previous and forthcoming week, for the benefit of those who may ring in later to listen:

Georgina: *"Right it's just us two Kevin! [laughs] ..."*

Kevin: *"[laughs] I suppose other people will be ringing in so we'd better do the business hadn't we?"*

Georgina: *"Alright then."*

¹⁵ The norms of appropriate audio-conference conduct appeared to have developed during the history of the team as they progressed through their 'learning curve', along with their constant engagement with literature regarding 'best practice' virtual teamwork. They now offer advice to clients on 'best practice communication skills' as part of their consultancy work.

Kevin: *"I'll go first then."*
Georgina: *"Go on then! [laughs]"*
Kevin: *"[laughs] Well, last week I had a meeting in Preston ..."*

The norm of what is considered 'proper group talk' for audio-conferences appeared to serve as a disciplining power. Participants often mentioned that they needed to speak to a team-mate 'one-to-one', but they always arranged to discuss it later, either at the end of the call or during a separate 'private' phone call. Georgina and Kevin in the example just described decided that making a separate one-to-one call was preferable to simply instructing the listener (such as the researcher) that they do not have to listen their conversation, given that it does not address the group audience:

Kevin: *"We'll sign off and have a brief chat about some boring stuff about questionnaires, so if you're listening in, you don't have to listen to this bit."*
Georgina: *"Shall we end the call and then we can [pause]"*
Kevin: *"Yeah. I'll give you a call Georgina."*
Georgina: *"Alright then. [laughs]"*
Kevin: *"Bye-bye."*
Georgina: *"Goodbye everybody! [laughs]"*

Participants also conformed to a strict turn-taking mechanism regarding who was allowed to speak. The audio-conference talk was distinct from the multi-party talk that occurred in team meetings, for example. The talk that occurred during audio-conferences may be best described as a series of monologues, with a verbal mechanism for selecting the next participant to speak. Examples (taken from separate occasions) of this turn-passing mechanism include:

"Now over to you, Georgina."
"OK then. Mr Wright."
"Right. Georgina, darling."
"And I'll pass to Carol."

"I now nominate, who shall I nominate, Darren [laughs]."

"So, who shall we choose? Eric."

Team members themselves appeared to be aware of their reliance on each participant to conform to this turn-taking discipline to make the audio-conference 'work'. One such reflexive comment occurred when Nigel disrupted the normal structure of the call by 'hanging up' after his turn because he was actually busy travelling to visit a client at the time (the dual workload mentioned above). The 'problem' was identified as such when Nigel failed to select the next speaker before he left the call:

Nigel: *"OK then. [pause] I've gotta hang up now guys cos I need to get into town"*

?: *"Ok, bye."*

[Nigel puts phone down]

[long pause]

Eric: *"He didn't say who goes next! We're fucked! We haven't got a process for this! [Laughs]"*

[laughter]

Martin: *"I hope you didn't swear then!"*

Barry: *"Free for all, aauuuggghhh!"*

[more laughter]

Eric: *"Who's gonna go then?"*

Barry: *"Well, I'll go then. [pause] Right, last week..."*

The 'problem' is finally resolved when the team leader Eric initiates a process of asking who would like to take the next turn, and Barry takes up this offer and begins his turn. Eric and Barry's joking comments render explicit the strict conversational protocol that normally works implicitly to make the interaction appear so 'natural'. The protocol demands continual work by virtue of requiring the disciplined conformance of every team member, in order for the interaction to occur seamlessly. Should team members cease to act in a disciplined manner, for example by not observing the turn taking mechanism, talking for 'too long' on

the 'wrong subjects', or by engaging in side-conversations or creating background noise, the precarious nature of the interaction would presumably be made evident.

Team members appeared to consent and conform to certain social protocols about communication not only during the scheduled audio-conference, but also more generally regarding the more ad-hoc use of a range of ICTs. Staying 'contactable' was seen by FlexiTeam as a major preoccupation because they have less face-to-face contact available to them than co-located teams. Indeed, the practitioner literature (section 2.1) advised that not only should a range of ICTs be used to support virtual teamwork, but social 'norms of availability' should be developed around the technologies. From my ethnographic experience, this prescription can be seen to entail a significant degree of labour and discipline on the part of team members.

4.3.3 The 'Contactability Imperative'

"I'm contactable all day. ... Wherever I go my mobile goes, so I get all my calls."

(Carol, interview)

A common concern about virtual teamwork regards the problem of staying contactable while 'working anywhere'. The scenario presented this problem as 'solved' by FlexiTeam's use of technologies:

"Wherever they go, they take their mobile phones and laptop computers to keep in contact with the team and clients."

This account marginalizes the forms of self-discipline required by team members in order to remain contactable. The 'contactability imperative' appeared to serve to discipline team members' conduct on a day-to-day basis. Team members seemed to take on-board the personal responsibility of ensuring that working virtually did not result in absence from communication channels.

The central technology used by FlexiTeam to stay contactable was the telephone. Team members have dedicated business telephone lines installed for working at home. Carol reasoned that her working at home situation is in fact an improvement in contactability from a conventional office environment. Carol's level of discipline includes carrying a portable land-line telephone while making coffee to avoid missing a call:

"At home I have a hands-free phone, and I take it with me when I'm making a coffee so I don't miss a call. It's even better than in an office sometimes, because if you went to the kitchen in an office you'd miss the call."

Team members use a function to re-direct their calls to their mobile phone while travelling or at client sites. As Carol explained: *"If I'm in my car my mobile is on all the time."* Many team members redirect their calls again from their mobile phone to the desk phone when they work at a hot-desk or in a company office. Carol did not feel disciplined enough to then remember at the end of the day to re-direct the calls back to her mobile – meaning she might end up missing calls. Instead she simply takes her mobile with her wherever in the company office she goes.

"I don't divert my mobile to the desk because I could forget to re-divert it again. Wherever I go my mobile goes so I get all my calls."

The imperative to be contactable extends to include preparation for being 'un-contactable' while team members are engaged in other work tasks such as meetings or presentations. Team members prepare for going into a meeting by diverting calls to their voicemail box. During breaks in the meeting and certainly at the end of the meeting team members will dial in to pick up messages and return the calls. As Carol described:

"I always divert my calls to voicemail while I'm in a meeting, and pick them up afterwards and return those calls."

Most team members followed a daily discipline of updating their voicemail message to describe when and why they are (temporarily and reluctantly) unavailable that day. Georgina described this sort of discipline as 'best practice' during a consultancy workshop for managers of dispersed teams within TechnoCo. She described such 'sloppy' practice as not updating voicemail messages as 'annoying', along with those undisciplined people who leave voicemail messages that are too long and 'waffling'.

Most team members appeared conscientious about their responsibility for being available - not only for the sake of colleagues but also for clients. During our interview, I asked Darren what he does to nurture the relationships that are important for getting his job done successfully. After talking about the importance of face-to-face contact, Darren talks about the importance of availability to clients while they are apart. He tells me about the time when he made himself available to a client even while he was at an exhibition stand dealing with other potential clients.

“The other thing is availability- I try to consciously contact them [clients] regularly, even if it’s just a phone call just to make sure everything’s OK. And if they leave messages I make sure I get back to them. Don’t leave them stranded. That was the case yesterday, the [client’s on-line] questionnaire went iffy and I was on the [exhibition] stand. But I had a word with the guys [FlexiTeam colleagues] and said ‘I’ve gotta go away and sort this out’. I spoke to the [client’s] web-site guys and said check it, and managed to sort it out while at the exhibition. We sorted it out within a couple of hours. From the clients point of view that’s good, cos they could’ve got a voicemail message saying “I’m on an exhibition stand all day, speak to me on Friday”. But I didn’t do that, I kept dialling in for messages and as soon as I picked it up, y’know.”

Darren described how he took onboard the dual workload of being contactable to an existing client while simultaneously working at an exhibition to attract new clients. Being ‘away’ for one day did not take him away from the needs of his clients, with the help of technology like voicemail and his mobile phone. However, it seems it was ultimately the self-disciplined ‘customer service’ work orientation of Darren, not the availability of the technology, that enabled this example of ‘successful virtual working’ to be practiced.

Absence for longer periods of time, such as annual leave, did not mean that the imperative to manage your contactability is removed. Although Eric thoroughly prepared for his holiday absence, constructing a document called ‘holiday notes’ which detailed how contingencies should be dealt with in his absence, he still appeared to subject himself to the imperative to be contactable. Eric wrote an email to the team saying he would check an email account while on holiday so long as only ‘urgent’ items were forwarded.

To be sure, these issues may well be a feature of life in most contemporary organisations. What is interesting in the case of FlexiTeam is the meaning and significance they attribute to staying ‘contactable’ *as teleworking consultants*.

FlexiTeam sell virtual teamwork to clients as a seamless, connected and effective way of working. Realising this sales pitch within the team is therefore an important issue. The team's relationship to clients shall be discussed further in section 5.2.

Staying contactable invariably also involves the use of email. Email is now an almost ubiquitous Groupware technology, but moreover a technology that is understood by FlexiTeam to play a critical role in supporting virtual teamwork. Certainly, any analysis of FlexiTeam would be incomplete without a description of their use of email¹⁶. Again, my ethnographic experience revealed that the use of email in FlexiTeam is associated with an array of social norms regarding well-disciplined and appropriate use.

4.3.4 Email

It would be straightforward to expect FlexiTeam to readily and extensively use e-mail in the co-ordination and control of their dispersed activities. Indeed, the scenario (4.2) described the ease and success in which Barry simply forwarded an email to the team and received a reply from Terry within four hours. However, my fieldwork suggests that FlexiTeam's use of email is far from free and unhindered. FlexiTeam members exercise great care and discipline regarding their use of email, and crucially their decisions regarding *not* sending emails. This section details the multiple forms of discipline employed by FlexiTeam members when using email. Members furthermore understand this email discipline to be an essential component of effective virtual teamwork.

I came to learn about the workload constituted by email when I first met the team leader Eric. I was astonished when he told me that *every day* he receives 50 to 60 emails. He estimated that emails from FlexiTeam members account for 60 per cent of this total. After all, he told me, they were a dispersed team and email was one important medium for keeping in contact while apart. Apparently the number of emails sent within the team used to be 'worse' than this but everyone has since made a conscious effort to "cut down on the CC culture". That is, team members are encouraged to be more disciplined when deciding whether to 'copy' other people into the emails they send. Nigel similarly emphasised during his interview the importance of striking a balance between sending too much or too little by email:

"We needed to strike a happy medium. We need to use email far more considerately."

The importance of disciplined and 'considerate' email use was emphasised during the consultancy workshop for TechnoCo managers that I attended, entitled "Managing Dispersed Teams". Georgina pointed out to the workshop participants that copying people into emails unnecessarily is bad 'email etiquette' and can annoy people. She added that if anyone in FlexiTeam does this they get 'flamed' back. This form of reaction appears to act as a social mechanism for ensuring disciplined behaviour regarding email. Georgina stressed that undisciplined email is not just socially unacceptable. She went on to state that it is easy to miss important information when you are 'overloaded' with emails and voicemails. Furthermore, Georgina warned the workshop participants about the problem of spending all day on email without getting any 'productive' work done. It therefore

¹⁶ I am unable to comment on emails sent 'one-to-one' or 'one-to-few' within the team because I was only included in the group distribution list.

seems there is also a business imperative for being disciplined in your email behaviour.

In our interview, Eric rationalized that the sender might also ultimately benefit from disciplined email conduct. He explained how he sends very few emails to his boss with only 'high level' information in them. He translated this into a benefit for him because his boss will therefore read the email if he is not 'overburdened'.

"Timeliness is the thing. Don't overburden him, don't become a pain in the arse, otherwise he won't read it. If you send him an email every day he'd just bin it. If he knows the email you send him which comes in once a quarter is actually worth reading, he'll read it."

I observed an example of how team members manage this 'overloading' when Darren sent an email to the team upon his return from holiday in France. Darren asked his team-mates to help his overloading situation by phoning him to point out any urgent requests made during his absence, in case he misses them amongst his 'huge inbox'.

Bonjour mon petit team maties

I av returned to the fold and I am busy admiring my huge inbox. Rest assured I will be getting up to speed over the next day or so, but if you are awaiting an urgent response to anything you have sent since I went on leave, please give me a call.

During my visit to Kevin's home office I observed first-hand the forms of self-discipline that occurred when sending emails. Kevin commented that he was forwarding an email (sent to him by a colleague with whom he is currently liasing on a project) to his superiors Eric and Martin "to keep them informed". He pointed out that he was forwarding the email with the heading 'FYI' (For Your Information) to signal that it is 'low priority'. Kevin explained to me how important he thinks it is

to use headings such as these, in particular not to use the 'Important Flag' unless it is really urgent.

Kevin told me that receives around 30 emails a day, some of which is 'junk'. He does think the jokes that are often circulated are fun but should be sent low priority. He reasoned that people should think about what they send to whom, and never send 'dross'. In fact, he went on to tell me that he thinks teams should draw up and agree to an 'email charter' that details acceptable email behaviour. Properly disciplined email behaviour would perhaps help his team-mate Darren (see above) in sifting the urgent from the unimportant messages.

Another mechanism for counteracting the 'overloading' of undisciplined email conduct is the use of distribution lists. Distribution lists are designed to specify the correct audience for a particular message. However, as Carol pointed out during a team meeting, she had been receiving a lot of emails through the group list even though she was not directly the audience for many of the messages. For example, she was receiving requests through the list for a consultant or business developer (BD), of which she is classified as neither, to 'cover' an event the sender could not attend. During her 'individual update' at the team meeting she therefore attempted to diplomatically ask her team-mates to be more 'considerate' when sending her emails:

Carol: *"Just a team thing really. The group emails, we're all as bad as each other, me included. You know when you send responses to 'are you free for this event?' saying yes, no, yes, no: you end up with 8 emails. In fact I would still like to see still the emails 'cause it's nice to know what everyone's doing. I just think we should consider, me included, copying everyone in on that. Yes?"*

Martin: *"Copying or not copying?"*

Carol: *"Copying or not copying. That is the question."*
Terry: *"The counter argument is that you see that someone picks it up. I've tried both ways. If you reply only to the person saying I can't do it, then if other people could see that it might encourage them."*
Carol: *"That's good for you guys but not for me."*
Terry: *"That means setting up different distribution lists."*
Carol: *"Yes. I wondered whether its worth doing a distribution list with me in, and one without."*
Terry: *"A 'Carol-list'."*
Eric: *"Or a distribution for BD and a distribution for consultancy."*
Martin: *"I think there's a danger of"*
Terry: *"/there's no right answer."*
Carol: *"Just keep me in mind. If you don't think that I really need to know."*

Carol appeared to be requesting that the team, including herself, strive to be more reflexive and self-disciplined regarding their email conduct. In response, Terry explained that he himself has weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of replying individually or to the group. He spelt out the benefit of replying to the group because others may be encouraged to 'pick up' the request if they see nobody else accepting¹⁷. He also points out that Carol's suggestion would require setting up a different distribution list, concluding that there is no right answer to this dilemma. Carol thus accepted 'keeping it in mind' as a sufficient solution to her problem. This example seems to demonstrate the work undertaken by FlexiTeam to reflect upon and improve their current communication practices. Team members seem to be constantly reminded to be reflexively aware of what emails they are sending to whom, lest they be seen as inconsiderate and undisciplined email users.

This example of 'are you free for this event?' is typical of the forms of interaction that occurred by group email. Emails were generally short and could generally be

¹⁷ The obligation to be a 'team player' is evident in this comment by Terry (explored further in section 5.4).

classified into one of three broad categories: arranging events, requesting information, and/or distributing information. Email was not used as a medium for 'being a team' in the manner that I anticipated prior to my fieldwork. Collaborative work such as discussing problems, reviewing reports and brainstorming for ideas were not conducted through the group emails.

FlexiTeam rarely used the group email list for engaging in creative or unstructured dialogue. Such dialogue tended to occur instead during phone calls, audio-conferences or team meetings. Terry explained in his interview why this may be the case, when I asked him how he goes about solving problems within a dispersed team:

"You might send an email round, if you could be bothered expressing it in an email, depends what the problem is. ... You might start an email thread, so Kevin might say 'I think there's an opportunity to turn our training package into a CDROM' which is probably where it started a year and a half ago. You might bung that round the team and say 'What do you think?' You might get a round-robin of replies. ... It might actually be stopped by someone saying 'This is actually too big, why don't we keep it for the next Team Meeting'."

Terry suggested that expressing a complex problem in an email was more onerous task ('if you could be bothered') than verbally explaining the issue. He also explained that emails tended to be 'stopped' if the discussion is deemed 'too big', in which case it is often transferred to another media, such as a face-to-face meeting. Seemingly, part of the discipline of email concerns knowing when it is considered appropriate *not* to conduct communication by email. Indeed, most members of the group consider email to be an inappropriate medium for the communication of many complex and sensitive issues. As Georgina stated in our interview:

“At the end of the day, the way to sort things out: if you need to talk to somebody, bloody well talk to them, not email them.”

Team members were clearly conscious of being seen to be using email only for ‘appropriate’ purposes. This finding is similar to the observations regarding audio-conferencing above – what issues can be discussed and how dialogue should be conducted follows strict social protocols. This meant that discussion of many issues was simply not conducted by email. According to FlexiTeam, an important component of being an effective dispersed team included the discipline of *not* selecting email for certain topics of communication.

To summarise, FlexiTeam understand that effective dispersed team-working requires great care and discipline regarding the volume, the audience, the content and the manner in which emails are sent. This email discipline can also involve a form of regulation discouraging the use of email in favour of other forms of communication. Team members are careful to use email only for topics deemed ‘appropriate’ for this medium. They are also seen to *consciously reflect on* their communication practices in a self-disciplining manner.

Many workers of course use email, including the two other teams I studied, but FlexiTeam appeared to be distinctive in their emphasis on the need to consciously reflect on and self-discipline their email conduct. For FlexiTeam, as teleworking consultants, using email ‘properly’ was of crucial importance. It was only FlexiTeam that deliberated to such an extent about their use of email, and stressed the importance of having an email ‘code of conduct’. The importance of perfecting their own practices in the light of their identity as teleworking consultants is discussed further in section 5.1.

A similar self-disciplining process was also observed within team members' use of the telephone for intra-team communication. The section on 'contactability' has already considered the imperative to be available to *others* who seek to initiate communication. The next section examines the labour and self-discipline that appears to be constituted by the social norm regarding members *themselves* initiating intra-team communication.

4.3.5 Phoning

FlexiTeam placed notable emphasis upon the telephone as a means of communication between virtual team members. The team members appeared to exercise substantial self-discipline regarding the use of the telephone, in particular the mobile phone, in order to 'keep in touch' with other team members while apart. In the absence of conversations prompted by chance encounters in the office, team members deliberately and consciously engineered one-to-one conversations over the telephone.

Indeed, the scenario described how Barry "always phones his team-mates ... even if it's just for a chat". Similarly, the literature review (2.1.2) stressed the importance of communication for generating a sense of team unity in virtual teams. Managers were advised to ensure that team members utilised the telephone in particular, including social content as well as business issues (Duarte and Snyder, 2001).

This work of phoning seemed to be left unacknowledged in these accounts - a taken-for-granted workload necessary for virtual teams to maintain cohesion

while apart. The aim of this section is therefore to render this workload explicit and problematic. For example, Georgina reflected upon the extent to which she disciplines herself to 'make herself' pick up the phone by placing the activity on her 'task list' for the day.

"I try and make a point of contacting those people who want to be contacted, so I will phone up, make myself - it will be on my task list, this is how seriously I take it - to phone somebody up every day."

Nigel also describes the conscious and deliberate effort he now makes to phone his team members:

"I made a conscious effort about two years ago to ring everybody in the team at least once a week. Especially when I was on the road quite a lot, and there's a lot of dead time while you're driving, I would deliberately go through everybody in the team. That was something I wanted to introduce cos I was aware that once you started working in isolation, and I was running all over the show - Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales, there is little contact. And apart from the Monday audio call, which is everybody, there is no individual one-to-one dialogue. So I made a conscious effort. I think that's something everyone should strive to.... It's just like passing the time of day in the office. You'd phone someone up - 'How's it going?' is the general line."

Nigel draws an analogy with the sort of talk he would engage in when passing the time of day with a colleague in the office. Yet he reasoned that, in a virtual team, these encounters cannot be left to chance. He suggests that these face-to-face encounters should be substituted with the conscious effort he makes to phone his team-mates. Nigel furthermore understands that this self-disciplining phoning process should also be the goal of his colleagues.

Duncan also acknowledged the importance of the phone when working in a dispersed team. However, his accounts indicated a more negative reflection on

the effort required to sustain the 'flexible working arrangement'. During our interview I ask Duncan to describe his feelings towards office-based work and virtual teamwork. In reference to the latter he comments:

"The phone becomes so so important, calling people and making sure you're talking. I find it tough, I find it really tough at times."

Later in the interview I asked how he keeps in touch with his colleagues in the team. Again he pinpoints the telephone as the main technology and highlights the sustained effort he exerts to make these calls.

"Calling people. But it gets strained at times. But that's how you do it, you call people up. I try and call people during the week, but that just seems to be my- I mean I don't wanna do that. But if Friday, I haven't talked to anyone, if I've been busy and haven't had the chance to I just make that effort to call people. But you can't call everyone, you can't ring around and everyone be available."

Here Duncan casts light upon one of the problems of the ideal of phoning everyone. He finds the ideal is hard to maintain given his workload. He becomes consciously aware of this 'slippage' by Friday, by which time it may be too late to phone everyone, and for his team-mates to be 'free to talk' themselves.

Other team members manage this pressure by redefining what being 'free to talk' means. Team members admittedly do a lot of travelling. Many view this time spent 'on the road' as "*dead time*", as Nigel stated in the quote above, in the sense that other work activities are not simultaneously being completed. One way in which team members recover this 'dead time' and make it into 'productive time' is by talking to other team members on their mobile telephones.

I learnt about the extent to which the mobile phone is used while 'on the road' during a shadowing visit when three team members were exchanging humorous stories at the lunch table. Darren told us about the day he talked to Terry on his mobile phone on the way home from a client visit, only stopping the conversation when he had actually arrived at his doorstep! Georgina similarly recalled the day she had a conversation with Terry on her mobile while travelling home. She was sat on the drive still talking and she finally had to call off because she needed to go inside to the toilet!

Here the team members seem to be describing how they engage in additional forms of labour to maintain their virtual team by using the mobile telephone while driving for work purposes. This additional work and discipline is undertaken to enable the team members to communicate even while spending long days travelling to visit clients. Communication performed at a distance is understood to make FlexiTeam a 'team' as opposed to a set of disparate teleworking individuals.

This theme of 'being a team' also appears to help us to understand another important aspect of FlexiTeam's working life – the monthly team meeting. As per the 'best practice' recommended in the practitioner literature (section 2.1.2), FlexiTeam place great emphasis upon the whole team meeting in person. Precisely because they are dispersed most of the time, the team understand that great value is to be derived from travelling to meet every month. Again, following the practitioner literature (2.1.2), the team emphasises the benefits of meeting in person for reducing social isolation, building inter-personal relationships and creating trust.

4.3.6 The Team Meeting

In the scenario, Barry reflected upon the value of team meetings for “those all important face-to-face discussions” and “the social side of work”. Indeed, it was Barry who first taught me about the significance the team ascribes to team meetings. Over lunch, I was describing the other teams I was interested in studying within TechnoCo, when Barry pointed out to me that virtual teamwork may not be the success it is for FlexiTeam across the board. This he put down to the fact that other teams tend not to follow FlexiTeam’s practice of religiously getting together every month for team meetings.

The importance ascribed to team meetings was reiterated during the “Managing Dispersed Teams” consultancy workshop being run by three members of FlexiTeam for managers of virtual teams within TechnoCo. In spite of team meetings being part of a company-wide quality policy, some managers described how they often held their meetings by audio-conference, or have even missed meetings. One workshop participant described how his team meetings always ended up getting cancelled due to the ‘bottom line’ – they not only cost too much to get everyone together, he explained, but would also mean taking staff away from serving customers for a day.

The FlexiTeam members conducting the workshop reacted with shock and dismay to hear of such practice. Martin insisted that teleworkers needed to get together to build teams properly, and therefore team members should be *made* to attend. Kevin agreed with his team-mate Martin’s view, emphasising the business benefits of sharing the ‘office grapevine’ when team members get together. Martin reminded the workshop participants of FlexiTeam’s ‘best practice’,

whereby team meetings are made fun and interesting to encourage people to attend. They frequently have games, hold the meeting in different locations and make sure they are not routine¹⁸.

The picture of team meetings presented so far, like the scenario (4.2), suggests that team meetings are wholly useful, effective and fun. Yet FlexiTeam experience a particular form of labour regarding meeting face-to-face that is not experienced by co-located teams. Meeting up is problematical for FlexiTeam in particular because they do not have a 'central office' as such where their office-based colleagues and manager are based because all members, including the manager, are home-based. Therefore the advice normally given to teleworkers to 'visit the office at least once a week' does not apply that easily to FlexiTeam.

Team members are located in home offices across England and Scotland, making the location of the meeting a sensitive issue, lest one member be unfairly advantaged by consistently having a shorter distance to travel. Indeed, the book by Fisher and Fisher (2001) aimed at practicing 'distance managers' advises that "it isn't fair if the same people always travel long distances for the face-to-face meetings." The location of the Team Meeting is therefore moved each month in order to be 'fair' overall to all team members. This notion of 'fairness' reveals the negative connotation attributed to travelling as a 'chore'. This issue shall be explored further in the next section.

The team meetings are usually held in one of the specially re-designed company building with facilities for teleworkers - such as 'hot-desks', 'touch-down' areas, pre-bookable meeting rooms - the very changes the team was previously

¹⁸ This example becomes significant in section 7.2, where FlexiTeam's 'preaching' to clients about the

involved with instigating as part of the 'Work-anywhere' project within TechnoCo. Every month a different team member volunteers to chair the meeting. This duty includes the responsibility of booking the meeting room and appropriate technology (for a fee chargeable to the team's expenses budget), searching for suitable hotel accommodation for those unable to make the journey there and back in one day, plus arranging the agenda and chairing the proceedings on the day. This level of preparation work stands in contrast to the informal gathering a co-located team may have every week.

Perhaps more subtle forms of labour and discipline occur during the meeting. Because the team meets only once a month, the meetings tend to be both lengthy and the agenda tightly compressed with many items to be covered. It is regarded as important that all agenda items are 'controlled' so that the team focus on what they have made the effort to travel to discuss, lest their time be 'wasted' by 'trivial or distracting' discussion. In contribution to the group email exchange about inviting two external guest speakers to the meeting, Georgina added:

Personally I see no issue with having 2 guests as long as we control all of the sessions and do what we come together to do!

'What we come together to do' may be interpreted according to the 'best practice' discourse FlexiTeam sell to clients. In line with the recommendations found in the practitioner literature (2.1), FlexiTeam inform clients of the benefits of face-to-face meetings for sharing tacit knowledge and building trusting relationships.

Conversational space at team meetings is therefore regarded as a valuable but scarce resource, turning the 'conversational floor' into a political issue. This may be a feature of meetings for co-located teams as well, but some members of FlexiTeam identified this issue as a particular problem due to their status as a virtual team who meet so irregularly. As will be discussed further in Chapter 6 (section 6.1), some team members expressed dissatisfaction with finding it hard to "get a word in edgeways" at team meetings. When asked about how the team keeps in touch, Carol explained:

"The Team Meetings help but they aren't that frequent due to us being a remote team. It's very difficult to get the opportunity to get people together more than once a month."

As home-workers, meeting up is often more difficult than for co-located teams. But the 'up-side' of this is thought to be the benefits of better work-life balance and a reduction in commuting. Barry was depicted in the scenario (4.2) as enjoying "being there for his family" and valuing the "10-second walk to the spare room" - a big improvement on the hour-long commute to work he used to suffer. Indeed, working from home is traditionally understood to substitute for and hence *reduce* the amount of physical travel necessary.

However, FlexiTeam members at times appeared to undertake a paradoxical *increase* in travelling as a result of their status as a dispersed team. This may well be true of salespeople in general, but FlexiTeam prided themselves on being a 'team' as opposed to individual salespeople. Although the amount of travelling to see clients might be consistent with salespeople in general, when it came to teamwork, FlexiTeam were clear about the need to meet regularly face-to-face. In

this sense, being a virtual team seemed to increase their travelling workload. This workload was also undertaken by the researcher in order to study FlexiTeam.

4.3.7 Travelling

Team members differed in the meaning they attributed to their travelling workload. Some viewed travelling as a 'necessary evil' of the job but nevertheless a price worth paying for achieving successful virtual teamwork. For those who enjoyed working from home for personal reasons and enjoyed their job in FlexiTeam, the scorecard was seen as balanced. Others were more sceptical and highlighted the impact of this workload on non-work life. For many their perception consisted of an ambiguous mix of the two positions.

However, FlexiTeam achieved a consensus on two important points – that extra travelling was the result of their 'flexible work arrangement' and that this additional workload was the responsibility of the individual. As opposed to claiming overtime pay, time spent travelling was demarcated 'in my own time' and treated as an often unpaid and hidden workload. Part of the 'success' of virtual teamwork for FlexiTeam appeared to depend on team members' willingness to both undertake and hide their travelling workload. My ethnographic insights suggest that their travelling workload is in part a medium and outcome of the 'value of client visits' constructed by the team, whereby working from home is devalued while being 'on the road' is elevated in importance. This value appeared to work to sustain team members' willingness to endure their travelling workload.

Travelling was an aspect of my ethnography where I could truly empathise with team members. In this respect, I was living my life as 'one of them'. Every Team

Meeting, client visit, one-to-one and business development meeting required travelling all over the country. During the long train journeys I would reflect on my situation. Surely a 'virtual ethnography' should not require so much physical displacement? Was teleworking not supposed to replace the commute to work? A conventional workplace ethnography studying co-located workers would usually involve the selection of a nearby company, or relocation to wherever the chosen company was located. This was not possible when studying FlexiTeam – members had no central office and were based in home offices across the length and breadth of the UK. To meet up in person, long distances had to be travelled by team members, researcher included.

FlexiTeam members tended to take personal responsibility for undertaking travelling whatever the cost (personal, financial, time). This was reflected in the story Kevin told me when I was shadowing him at home. He said that to get to Birmingham last week he had to set off at half five in the morning, or else any later he would get stuck in the traffic on the motorway. He sums up that "*travelling is part of the job whether you like it or not*". In the interview I conducted later on the same day he reflected on the travelling he and his team-mates undertake:

"I do travel a lot, mainly in the car because there's no airport with cheap flights near my home. You could say that my charge-out rate is such that it wouldn't be worth the time in the car, but that'd be in my own time. We live where we do, like Terry for example, so we have to concede that we do sometimes do a lot of travelling, and that will be in our own time."

Kevin's reasoning rests on the notion that FlexiTeam members want to live where they do (often for family reasons) and want to work for FlexiTeam, and are therefore willing to 'concede' that travelling will be 'in our own time' i.e. unpaid. Kevin's account seems to argue that in balance the travelling is a fair 'trade off'

for the benefits of teleworking, meaning he is happy to demarcate travelling as 'in his own time'.

Such demarcation work was vividly displayed in the discussion at one London Team Meeting about how travelling time should be recorded in their 'timesheets'. Georgina initiated a discussion of whether they should record the hours they actually do, even though they add up to more working days than there are in week (given an 8 hour working day), or whether to take the number of hours in the standard working day and divide up their time accordingly. Consistency was understood as important in order that group numbers were seen to be an 'accurate reflection' and individual patterns could be compared. As Terry pointed out, this was important because they are themselves engaged in offering work-life balance consultancy. Yet implicit and taken-for-granted in this discussion was that travelling 'naturally' took up a large proportion of their time and was left mainly unpaid. This could be seen to show how the 'deletion' of the travelling workload occurs.

This is not to say that travelling was seen as an enjoyable aspect of the job. Kevin explained his system for judging what he deemed a 'reasonable amount' of travelling to get to a meeting. He only 'claims' for his travelling time when he "gets the hump" about the amount. He personally does not claim if it takes him 2 hours to get to a meeting, but given 8 hours he does. Even the team leader Martin said he didn't bother recording his travelling time – it's too onerous a task in his view. He told the group "it's bad enough doing the travelling, let alone accounting for it!".

Nevertheless, during my ethnography I observed a further factor that appeared to shape their impetus towards undertaking travelling. The team seemed to place a higher value on time spent selling their services to clients than time spent working at home. This shaped the meaning they attached to days spent working at home. It appeared paradoxical to me when I first heard their expressions about working at home, given their role in promoting working from home. Here are some examples of the ways they described days spent working at home:

Georgina: *“Last Tuesday and Wednesday I was stuck in a pokey little room, screaming to get out. ... I’ll be chained to the desk again Thursday and Friday.”*

(Audio-conference)

Terry: *“If you work at home more than 5 days a lot of people recognise that you get cabin fever”*

(Interview)

Nigel: *“I try as a rule to never do more than 2 days at home in any one week, and never do 2 days concurrent, ‘cause of the social isolation element and the climbing the wall syndrome.”*

(Interview)

Nigel also made a comment during an audio-conference that enabled me to reflect on the values seemingly held by FlexiTeam. He described his activities last week as *“Wednesday Thursday Friday I didn’t do much at all, or didn’t do anything with any particular clients as such.”* Indeed, it appears that the demands of a client ultimately took priority over work undertaken at home. Working at home was not seen as ‘real work’ because the team member was interpreted as being ‘available’ if client work was to arise. As Terry explained in our interview:

“Just because you’re scheduled to be at home doesn’t mean- because that means you’re available and therefore you’ll react if something comes up that needs somebody to do something.”

The valuing of spending time with clients appears to be a company-wide value in the sense that 'customer-facing' roles are accorded higher status and remuneration. Indeed, Carol accounted for her failure in an interview to have her job re-graded as a management post to a lack of client experience. Yet this value may have particular consequences for members of FlexiTeam. It contributed to their emphasis on days spent away from the home office, with consequences for their travelling workload. It may be that to refuse to take personal responsibility for this workload would be to resist a widely held value about what is 'real work'.

In summary, this section has detailed the travelling overhead faced by a team who ironically sell teleworking as (among other things) reducing employees' commuting time. The researcher also experienced this travelling overhead in order to participate in the team. The expectation that this overhead should be demarcated as 'in your own time' appears to operate to render this workload hidden and taken-for-granted. Those who valued working from home for personal reasons tended to more or less willingly accept this workload. This suggested that FlexiTeam members were self-disciplining in many respects. Team members actively 'under-represented' the amount of time they spend working, for example. The value of client work seemed to direct their work time towards those tasks deemed most 'valuable' (that is, client-facing work), that also involved more travelling.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter began by introducing the reader to FlexiTeam (4.1) and presenting a 'scenario' of the everyday life of FlexiTeam (4.2). The scenario was constructed

in a manner consistent with promotional accounts of virtual teamwork, such as those produced by FlexiTeam themselves. The scenario portrayed teleworking as a seamless, effortless and flexible way of working. The data presented in the rest of the chapter then served as a critique of this scenario. Ethnographic data was presented that challenged the taken-for-granted assumption that virtual teamwork is both effortless and flexible (4.3). The data illustrated the multiple forms of labour and discipline engaged in by team members in order to sustain their virtual teamwork arrangement.

One principle finding that emerges from my ethnography is therefore that effective virtual teamwork may not simply the stable and predictable outcome of implementing 'best practice'. Virtual teamwork did not deterministically arise from the characteristics of the technology they used or the management processes they implemented. Virtual teamwork is therefore not inevitably 'beneficial' for team members or TechnoCo, as suggested in the presentations made by FlexiTeam (see section 1.1.3). Making a virtual team 'work' appeared to be a precarious accomplishment that required considerable discipline and effort on the part of the team members. This argument is encapsulated in a comment by one of the team members:

"If someone doesn't play the game, the whole thing falls down like a pack of cards."

Indeed, contrary to the notion that success is purely a matter of implementing 'best practice', my fieldwork with FlexiTeam has suggested that an alternative understanding of their virtual teamwork may need to be developed. The findings presented in this chapter raise some questions that have yet to be addressed. If virtual teamwork is a precarious accomplishment dependent on the consent and

commitment of the team members, how is this commitment achieved? This commitment to 'best practice' should not be taken for granted or assumed. Commitment is not the stable starting point of the analysis but the very issue to be explored. This is the second research question to be addressed in this thesis:

2. How might team members' subjective consent and commitment to 'best practice' virtual teamwork be secured?

A further level of analysis is required to address this question, one that draws on the theories of subjectivity discussed in the literature review. The literature review (2.4) established that subjectivity could be seen as a central medium for the achievement of employee commitment. It was also argued that subjectivity at work could be seen as constructed through employees' social relationships in the workplace. Answering the second research question therefore requires an in-depth appreciation of the local social relations through which FlexiTeam members negotiate their identity. These social relations, and their role in constituting team members' subjectivity, are the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Subjectivity and Social Relations

Introduction

FlexiTeam clearly have their own understandings about how their ‘success’ as a virtual team is achieved. ‘Best practice’ management processes, the very substance of their consultancy offering, are seen as crucial for the effective implementation of virtual teams. As Barry informed a potential client he visited, “*you’ve got to have the right processes in place*”. These management processes – as described in the previous chapter (section 4.3) – include weekly audio-conferences, monthly team meetings, and the ‘proper’ use of a range of ICTs such as email and the telephone. In other words, FlexiTeam understand themselves to be simply applying and perfecting the ‘best practice’ recommendations detailed in the practitioner literature (section 2.1).

However, this understanding present in both FlexiTeam’s consultancy advice and the practitioner literature fails to account for how the consent and commitment of team members to these new practices might be secured. Another level of analysis is required to address the question:

2. How might team members’ subjective consent and commitment to ‘best practice’ virtual teamwork be secured?

This chapter develops an alternative understanding of how the forms of labour and self-disciplined practices described in the previous chapter are secured from the team members. This understanding is grounded in an examination of the construction of team members’ subjectivity in relation to their social relationships

at work. The chapter argues that what team members *do* – the labour and discipline described in the previous chapter – can be made sense of by exploring who the team *are*. The practices described in the previous chapter can therefore be seen as a medium and outcome of team members' subjectivity.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the significance of FlexiTeam's social context, which can be appreciated through a comparison with the other two teams I studied during my fieldwork (who are not teleworking consultants). This also highlights the specificity and particularity of the data I collected from my experience with FlexiTeam – a team who not only *are* a virtual team but also *sell* the concept in their consultancy work.

The perspective taken in this study focuses upon team members' subjectivity, as negotiated in the context of their various local social relations. Three particular social relationships to which the team are accountable are explored in this chapter. First, the team's relationship with clients is examined (5.2). Second, the team's relationship with their employing company TechnoCo is considered (5.3). Third, the relationships between team members themselves is explored (5.4). The chapter concludes by drawing together the insights from these three sections and examining their inter-relationships (5.5).

5.1 The Significance of Social Context

The various practices described in the previous chapter are of course not entirely unique to FlexiTeam. Many of the practices may well be observed in other virtual teams, or even in co-located teams. For example, email and the telephone are nowadays used routinely in organisations for communication and coordination

purposes, in many situations that do not attract the label 'virtual teamwork'. To be clear, this thesis does not seek to claim that these practices represent an entirely new empirical phenomenon. Rather, the analytical interest arises from the social meaning attributed to these practices by FlexiTeam *as they comprise a more or less coherent discourse of 'best practice' processes that are presented as necessary for the realisation of 'successful' virtual teamwork.* The interest is therefore in virtual teamwork as a *discourse with normative effects* on team members' subjectivity.

What is particular to FlexiTeam, therefore, is the manner in which these practices are seen as a coherent assemblage of organisational practices (communication using ICTs, team meetings, being contactable, knowledge sharing, shared targets) that are understood to be crucial to the effective coordination of virtual teams. During my fieldwork I witnessed how team members consistently and conscientiously adhered to the 'best practice' described in the practitioner literature (section 2.1) and prescribed in their own consultancy advice. I was quietly impressed by the thought and effort they put into making virtual teamwork 'work'. Team members themselves seemed to be both self-consciously aware of and acutely reflexive about their practices, seeking constantly to improve their virtual teamwork 'processes'. Team members rarely struggled to describe in great detail how communication, for example, should be 'best' practiced. Team members also explicitly made the link between these practices and effective virtual teamwork. This was, after all, the very same advice they offered to clients on a daily basis. In this sense, the reader is asked to bear in mind that much of the data I collected can be interpreted as simply consisting of a well-rehearsed sales pitch.

From my experience of the two other teams I studied (one financial accounting team, one public sector technology sales), however, many of the practices FlexiTeam 'preached' seemed to occur on a more ad-hoc basis. These practices also tended to be attributed less significance in the work narratives of the team members. Many practices were not even explicitly and consciously recognised. The various practices certainly did not tend to follow such strict norms. The other teams certainly did not agonise to the same extent about how to improve their virtual teamwork practices.

These two other teams appeared to take-for-granted the practices ascribed so much significance by FlexiTeam, viewing them as a largely unrecognised and mundane detail of the job. I noticed that the interviewees appeared less 'well-versed' at offering coherent narratives regarding how and why they undertook such practices. Further, an explicit link was rarely made between the various practices and the success or otherwise of virtual teamwork. Their success at 'performing virtuality' was not high on the agenda, compared to the value placed on achieving success at financial accounting or technology sales, respectively. 'Virtuality' was a more or less incidental, not an integral, part of their team identity¹⁹.

This emphasis on identity suggests that understanding normative control requires attention to the local social relations through which team members construct their identity. This situated and contextual approach questions the notion that the correct technologies and 'best practice' management processes comprise a universal solution to the so-called 'problems' of managing virtual teams. Such

¹⁹ Having said this, by virtue of self-selecting to be part of my study, the team managers seem to have positively identified with being a 'virtual team'. This also suggests that the team managers considered being a 'virtual team' an important enough aspect of their team's work to be worthy of research attention.

'one-size-fits-all' propositions fail to take account of the social and cultural context in which virtual teamwork is situated.

The social context of FlexiTeam is particularly interesting because the team is not only engaged in *practicing* virtual teamwork, but their team identity is also bound up with *selling* virtual teamwork and related flexible working concepts. FlexiTeam's social relationship with existing and potential clients appeared to play a significant role in constituting the subjectivity of team members. The chapter shall examine this 'team-client' relationship first.

5.2 The Team-Client Relationship

"We feel like we must make it work, because if we don't, how can we sell it to clients?"

(Barry, fieldwork notes)

The aim of this section is to re-interpret many of the practices described in the previous chapter in the light of the social relationship between team members and their clients. It aims to offer a further level of analysis that explores how team members' commitment to the practices described in the previous chapter is achieved in relation to the construction of their identity with clients. It is suggested that what team members *do* on a day-to-day basis can be made sense of by developing an understanding of who they *are* as teleworking consultants. Team members appeared to engage in a reflexive interaction between *practicing* virtual teamwork and *selling* related concepts to existing and potential clients. In this section, it is argued that this reflexive dynamic may have normative consequences for team members' subjectivity.

The forms of labour and discipline undertaken by FlexiTeam members that are 'deleted' from their public accounts of virtual teamwork may be understood in the context of this social relationship with clients. Potential clients are often unconvinced about the benefits of virtual teamwork and identify many potential problems and barriers to implementing the change. FlexiTeam members spend considerable time with potential clients persuading them of the benefits of virtual teamwork. This is part a) of the consultancy discourse outlined in section 4.1.3: "teleworking is beneficial". They also stress that the problems identified by the client are not insurmountable if the client follows the 'best practice' of their consultancy advice. This is part b) of the consultancy discourse outlined in section 4.1.3: "teleworking must be practiced correctly".

FlexiTeam view this form of reluctance and resistance as erroneous, but nonetheless understandable. Darren even commented in our interview that:

"If we didn't have the experience of flexible working that we have, we might be resistant to it."

Darren went on to tell me that clients often think they have unique jobs that are incompatible with virtual teamwork – clients claim they need to have access to central information systems, and need to be able to speak to colleagues face-to-face all the time. Darren explained that there are no insurmountable problems: *"I think you can get round all of them, like we do in our team"*. Their role as consultants is therefore, as Nigel put it, to *"change mindsets"* and *"challenge the comfort zones"* of their clients.

5.2.1 'Got the T-Shirt': Exemplars of 'Best Practice'

FlexiTeam ground their claim to legitimate knowledge about virtual teamwork to a large extent through their involvement in TechnoCo's teleworking program 'Work-anywhere'. Indeed, the case of having 'been there, got the T-Shirt' is a vital 'selling point' used by FlexiTeam with their clients. I observed exactly this selling point being used by Eric during a meeting with a potential client. Eric described in great detail the history of the team in setting up TechnoCo's 'Work-anywhere' program. He then quoted statistics from the latest employee satisfaction survey to demonstrate the improved satisfaction of teleworkers as compared to office workers: "*Last year flexible workers were 6% happier bunnies!*" Eric appeared to be acting as a 'representative' and 'advocate' of the company's teleworking success.

Indeed, Eric described FlexiTeam's job as "*telling stories*", the most central being the story of how TechnoCo set up the "*largest and most successful*" teleworking scheme in the UK. As Nigel explained in our interview:

"...what better way to win business than to bang your own drum. We're not talking about it, we've done it."

This is an important aspect of the consultancy sales process, and with respect to my analysis, an important aspect of team members' identity. FlexiTeam are not selling an abstract classification of management knowledge, characteristic of the work of financial, IT or legal consultants for example. FlexiTeam have a more personal relationship to teleworking because they not only *sell* teleworking but also *are* teleworkers. Moreover, FlexiTeam aspire to be seen by clients as embodiments, exemplars and evangelists of 'best practice'. In order to maintain a legitimate identity with clients, FlexiTeam must be seen to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk". FlexiTeam's relationship to their consultancy discourse thus

appears to be highly intimate, reflexive and compelling by virtue of the 'exemplar' identity they seek to construct with clients. Team members thus strive to be the *personification* of their consultancy discourse.

I observed an instance of this 'exemplar' identity being performed during a client meeting I attended while shadowing Barry. The two managers of the (potential) client organisation identified 'knowledge sharing' as the primary reason why they were reluctant to implement virtual teams. One manager described her concerns that knowledge shared between staff in the office would be lost if people worked from home: "*they bump into each other on the way to the kitchen and ask for ideas... they couldn't do this if they were all at home.*"

Barry quickly sought to alleviate the clients' concerns by describing how FlexiTeam use their shared 'folders' and database 'ClientInfo' to share knowledge regardless of where they are located. Barry stressed that there was no 'blocker' to virtual teamwork, but that new processes are required to make it work effectively: he told the clients "*you've got to have the right processes in place, although it doesn't feel 'processy'*". Here 'processy' refers to the potential for processes to be rigid and stifling, which Barry sought to disassociate himself from. Barry then offered the client a personal 'testimony' of the benefits of being able to work in various locations while remaining part of his team and balancing his family life. The clients exclaimed "*wonderful!*" as he described himself mowing the lawn at home during his lunch break.

Within this narrative to clients there is likely to be little room for a description of the recent labour FlexiTeam members have undertaken to make ClientInfo accessible from 'anywhere-anytime', as described earlier in section 4.3.1. This

'deletion' may be shaped by Barry's social relationship with clients. In this case Barry is not only attempting to sell the abstract concept of virtual teamwork, but is crucially also selling through being the embodiment of 'best practice'. In order to sell virtual teamwork as a straightforward, effortless, technology-enabled solution to the client's organisational problems, Barry constructs a contextually located version of his personal experiences. To include aspects of the story constructed in this thesis - emphasising the problems FlexiTeam have recently encountered regarding updating the database ClientInfo (section 4.3.1) - could potentially compromise this sales pitch.

The relationship with clients was also highlighted when Martin called me in for a chat about my research, after he had taken over leadership of the team. Martin told me that on an almost daily basis team members come up against clients who claim that 'teamwork' would be adversely affected by working from home. Martin told me how he informs these apprehensive clients about Terry, who is based in Scotland, in order to dispel their concerns. Martin explained that all the team members are conscious of how much harder it is for Terry to feel 'part of the team' due to his distant location (Terry is the furthest away from the other team members, who are all located in England). This is why, according to Martin, the other team members make such an effort to call Terry, even "*just for a chat*". Indeed, Georgina told me in our interview:

"I will phone ... somebody up every day. So I phone Terry, mainly 'cause he's sort of out on a limb quite a lot."

Martin's narrative can therefore help to place in context the amount of conscious effort made by team members to phone their team-mates described in section 4.3.5. Indeed, Martin himself stated that he always tries to phone Terry (as

opposed to others) when he is on a long journey in his car, precisely because he physically distanced from the rest of the team. Martin summed up by telling me: “*it might cost more in company phone bills, but it works!*”. The picture Martin clearly seeks to paint to clients is of effective virtual teamwork. Martin informs clients of how Terry is seen as a valuable member of the team, and Terry himself feels a sense of being part of a team *in spite* of his location, thanks to their ‘best communication practice’.

Phoning Terry does not therefore appear to be an altruistic but incidental act on the part of team members. Phoning Terry assumed a great *meaning* and *significance* in the context of their consultancy work with clients. This suggests that the social relationship with clients constitutes a reflexive subjectivity for team members. Team members attempt to dispel the doubts of clients (“teamwork might be damaged”) and sell their consultancy services using personal examples of their own ‘success’ (“phoning Terry”). In other words, team members strive hard to be ‘exemplars of best practice’ in order to convince clients that virtual teamwork ‘works’. Through their relationship with clients, their consultancy discourse appeared to have a significant normative power, operating at the level of team members’ subjectivity to generate self-discipline with regard to ‘phoning Terry’.

This ‘exemplar’ identity can help to make sense of many of the other self-disciplining and labouring practices of team members described in chapter 4. The work of sustaining contactability (4.3.3) – such as checking and updating voicemail, returning calls, covering for absences - could be understood in the context of a client relationship that involves promoting virtual teamwork as seamless, connected and effective. Darren was keen to tell me about how he was

responsive to his client's problems even while at an exhibition stand (4.3.3). Likewise, team members' self-disciplined and considerate use of email (4.3.4) could be understood in relation to their advice to clients about 'best practice' communication for virtual teams. For example, advice about how best to use email and voicemail was given by Georgina to participants of the "Managing Dispersed Teams" workshop I observed (section 4.3.3). The conversation about the group email list initiated by Carol at the Team Meeting, and the personal reflection offered by Kevin during my visit to his home office, suggested that team members do indeed reflect upon and attempt to improve their communication practices (section 4.3.4).

Team members' day-to-day practices appeared to assume a great significance and come under close scrutiny by virtue of their relationship with clients. In order to sell teleworking, or perhaps simply maintain consistency between their actions and their consultancy discourse, team members seemed to self-discipline their practices and labour at making virtual teamwork 'work', as described in Chapter 4. What they *do* as teleworkers appears to be inextricably linked to who they *are* as teleworking consultants.

5.2.2 Close to the Customer

FlexiTeam also promote teleworking on the basis that it enables employees to be 'closer to the customer' (see Introduction, section 1.1.3). This appeared to be evident in Darren's story in the previous chapter about being contactable to an existing client while at a conference stand trying to attract new clients (see section 4.3.3). Darren's narrative presented this as an example of successful virtual teamwork. Carol also told me an almost identical story. However, this

section will describe how the two stories can be distinguished by their vastly different outcomes. It is hoped that the contrast between the two stories might reveal something of FlexiTeam's values and their normative implications for team members' subjectivity.

Carol told me how she was helping another team member out at a conference when, during a meeting with potential clients, she had to take a call to instruct the vet to go ahead with an operation on her cat. Like Darren, Carol was using the technology of the mobile phone to be contactable while working 'anywhere, anytime'. This appears to be a success story of how virtual team members can balance work and home demands using mobile phone technology. As Carol herself pointed out in her interview regarding FlexiTeam's role in offering work-life balance consultancy:

"I'm open about it, 'cause this is what we promote, so why don't we do what we promote."

Yet the outcome was very different to Darren's story of being responsive to the customer. Carol told me her colleague "*had a go at her*" because it was inappropriate to leave during a client meeting. What is interesting for this thesis is that Darren's practices were positioned as 'appropriate' while Carol's was labelled 'inappropriate'. In other words, the *meaning* of the activity appeared to differ in these two examples.

'Delighting the customer' and 'supporting carers', as promoted by FlexiTeam (see Introduction, section 1.1.3), are not therefore simply the predictable benefits of implementing virtual teams. The social outcomes are not determined and have to be interpreted, negotiated and given meaning in context of the local social

relations of the particular case. In the case of FlexiTeam, a hierarchy of values appeared to have developed in which 'delighting the customer' was attributed greater importance than 'work-life balance'.

This hierarchy goes some way towards making sense of the different trajectories of Darren and Carol's story described above. This hierarchy is also evidenced in the extensive travelling and long hours worked by team members (discussed below), in spite of their involvement in work-life balance consultancy (see section 4.3.7). The prioritisation of values may be understood in the context of the team-client relationship, whereby a failure to 'deliver' could be interpreted by clients as evidence of the shortcomings of virtual teams, thus compromising their very sales pitch. 'Customer service' may ultimately have to be prioritised in a team whose role is selling teleworking as enabling employees to be 'closer to the customer' (see section 1.1.3).

5.2.3 Reflecting on Reflexivity

The team members themselves commented on occasions about this reflexive interaction between practicing and selling virtual teamwork. For example, during my fieldwork the team was developing a 'communication guide' product to sell to clients that included prescription on how to conduct effective audio-conferences. This helps to make sense of the following reflexive comment by Georgina made at the start of one of the weekly audio-conferences:

Georgina: *"Shall we start then?"*

Barry: *"Lets start then."*

Eric: *"Who wants to start?"*

[pause]

Nigel: *“Oh, I’ll start then!”*
[laughter]
Georgina: *“Oh, Jesus! [laughs]”*
...
Georgina: *“How we’ve got the nerve to go and talk to people about best practice in communication skills I don’t know! [laughs]”*

This example shows how Georgina expressed her awareness of the interaction between practicing and selling ‘best practice’ virtual teaming. This interaction seems to constitute their subjectivity as team members who should ideally ‘practice what they preach’, resulting in the humour when the conversation breaks down. Indeed, Eric used this very phrase to explain to his team during one Team Meeting how they should gain credibility with their clients. FlexiTeam reason that ‘practicing what you preach’ is a major advantage in attracting clients because it differentiates them from other rival consultancy firms who advise on flexible working but (hypocritically) have not undergone the change themselves.

The strict discipline and protocol of audio-conference conduct (described in section 4.3.2) might be reinterpreted in the light of this reflexive comment about the team-client relationship. The self-discipline observed could be seen as related to FlexiTeam’s sense of self-identity. Team members strive to be ‘exemplars’ with respect to the ‘best practice’ they advise to clients, lest their identity be threatened by hypocritically failing to meet the standards they themselves recommend²⁰.

One situation in which team members tended to express an awareness of this reflexive relationship between practicing and selling virtual teamwork was when

they commented upon contradictions to their own consultancy advice. For example, while chatting to colleagues after hot-desking together for the day, Barry recognised the irony and chuckled about having stayed up most of the night to work on a proposal for 'work-life balance' consultancy. Similarly, during the team meeting discussion about how to record travelling time (section 4.3.7), Terry reminded his team that as consultants who advise on work-life balance issues they should be recording what hours they themselves work. Yet as Georgina commented at the end of the discussion, "*lets face it, we all do more than we should*". This is an aspect of their experience that seemed to be marginalized by team members when they talk to current and potential clients. Like Darren and Carol's stories described above, selling teleworking as enabling workers to be 'closer to the customer' appeared more to constitute a more powerful disciplinary force than applying their own consultancy advice and prioritising 'work-life balance'.

5.2.4 Boundary Construction

FlexiTeam's relationship with clients appeared to constitute a reflexive reinforcement of their teleworking consultancy discourse through a process of 'boundary construction'. It will be argued that FlexiTeam's identity - who they *are* - appeared to be constructed in relation to who they *are not*.

Stories about experiences with clients were often exchanged during team meetings. These stories were usually constructed as humorous tales of the

²⁰ Clients are not actually privy to FlexiTeam's audio-conference performances, so the charge of hypocrisy is unlikely to be made as such. Rather, the notion of hypocrisy may constitute a disciplinary power within the team in the sense that team members may seek to maintain consistency between what they 'preach' and what they 'practice'. The cynicism that appears to arise when this consistency is not upheld is discussed further in section 6.1.

'primitive' and resistant culture of client organisations. Various forms of resistance and deviation from the consultancy discourse by clients seemed to serve to reinforce the importance of the discourse within the team. For example, Barry told the team about a client he recently visited where a culture of mistrust and 'presenteeism' was so entrenched that the manager refused to let his staff work from home out of fear that they would take longer lunch breaks. The same manager was also convinced that if his staff worked from home they would not be available when he needed them, in spite of Barry's efforts to convince him that he could simply pick up the telephone! The reaction by the team was one of humour mixed with disdain, as others chuckled and nodded in empathy and agreement.

Similarly, Georgina told me about the humorous events she experienced with clients while attempting to conduct a 'space utilisation survey' – measuring at intervals how many 'bums are on seats' in client offices in order to audit how effectively space was being utilised to make the case for implementing teleworking. Georgina told me how client employees were so reluctant to 'give up their desks' that they tried to 'cheat' the survey process by seeing her coming and rushing back to their seats. Georgina then mocked this client not only for their resistance to new ways of working, but also their primitive technological sophistication. She laughed as she told me that they could not conduct a consultancy questionnaire on the Internet, as they do with all their other clients, because so few employees had access to and used this technology. Similarly, Nigel and Eric laughed in their review meeting as Nigel told Eric the story of his recent experience with a client. Both chuckled as Nigel told how he asked the client if he could send an email, to which the client replied '*no, we don't have email yet!*'.

Such client resistance and ‘primitivism’ could be seen to serve to reinforce the power of consultancy discourse within the team. Barry’s story may have acted to reinforce for team members the importance of FlexiTeam’s superior ‘culture of trust’. Georgina’s story appeared to remind team members that they must embrace the new way of working by giving up their territorial desire for office space. Nigel’s story highlighted the ‘embarrassment’ of not being ‘connected’ to the latest technology.

These stories also seem to reinforce the boundary between FlexiTeam and clients. FlexiTeam must of course work closely with clients, but must also maintain a position of superiority in terms being ‘experts’ and ‘exemplars’ if clients are to purchase consultancy products. The sales process would obviously suffer if clients judged themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable and confident about how to implement virtual teamwork on their own, removing the need for external consultancy advice. Indeed, Nigel explained in our interview that he thought sales were already declining for exactly this reason:

“In all honesty, the last few months we’ve seen a decline in the number of leads we’re getting. Dunno if that’s due to ... a maturing of the market, people will stop coming to us – [clients think] ‘we’ve read enough about it and can introduce it ourselves’.”

Team members therefore have the difficult job of convincing clients that they possess the superior expertise necessary for the successful implementation of virtual teamwork. ‘Do it yourself’ cannot be an option if the team is to sell consultancy services. FlexiTeam’s sales pitch rests upon their claim to experiential knowledge from having helped both themselves and TechnoCo through a ‘culture change’ that now successfully supports virtual teamwork. In other words, FlexiTeam claim to have ‘been there, got the T-shirt’. Clients are

promised a similar success if they are guided through this 'culture change' with the help of consultancy from FlexiTeam. This team-client relationship could be seen to constitute a reflexive pressure upon team members to differentiate their practices from those of 'backward' clients by being seen to be exemplars of 'best practice'.

The team also display a similar form of 'boundary management' with regard to their employing company. TechnoCo is regarded as a form of client in the sense that FlexiTeam helped implement the 'Work-anywhere' program within company before they sold consultancy services to outside clients. In fact, FlexiTeam still undertake some consultancy work within the company. The implementation of the 'Work-anywhere' program within TechnoCo was not without its difficulties and resistance. FlexiTeam identified senior management and an incompatible 'culture' as the major 'barriers' to implementing teleworking in TechnoCo. The team often shared stories about their experiences with employees from other parts of TechnoCo regarding their resistance and deviation from 'best practice'.

For example, Georgina told a story at a team meeting about a senior manager she had met just that week who refused to 'give up his desk', to which the team reacted with 'tuts' and 'oh dear's'. Other TechnoCo departments are often denigrated for wanting the new technology, such as mobile phones and 'virtual number' systems - not to enable flexible ways of working, but simply as 'toys for the boys'. Again, the reaction by the team to such stories was invariably one of disapproval. These stories also appear to constitute a reflexive power on the team to differentiate their 'best practice' from such 'bad practice', thereby constructing a boundary between them and the rest of TechnoCo. Who they *are* was constructed with reference to who they *are not*. These stories and the

disapproving reactions they invoked therefore seemed to serve to reflexively reinforce the normative power of their teleworking consultancy discourse within the team.

5.2.5 The Client-FlexiTeam-Researcher Relationship

Looking back on my fieldwork with FlexiTeam, it seems that my own behaviour and identity performances may have been shaped by FlexiTeam's social relationship with clients. For example, I was conscious of saying only positive things about virtual teamwork that fitted with their promotional role. I obviously kept quiet about any critical literature I happened to be reading at the time. I constructed a research proposal that framed my research questions in terms of a search for improved knowledge of 'best practice', with the aim of improving the effectiveness of virtual teamwork.

On the positive side, FlexiTeam's discourse about work-life balance enabled me to construct an identity that included aspects of my life outside work. I was at first surprised to observe this aspect of FlexiTeam's culture. For example, I was surprised when Georgina arrived at the Team Meeting openly stating that she had just attended her son's assembly class at school. Similarly, I was pleasantly surprised to hear conversations about team members' family and social life in many of the audio-conferences. In this sense, their promotion of virtual teamwork had, in my view, an enabling and productive effect on their subjectivity at work. Team members appeared to be able to incorporate their non-work lives into their

identity in most cases without fear of being seen as failing to commit their lives fully to the team²¹. As Carol explained during our interview:

“...on Monday I work from my Gran’s flat - one of the benefits of flexible working is if you have a caring responsibility. ... I’m open about it, ‘cause this is what we promote, so why don’t we do what we promote.”

A good example of how *my* subjectivity was constituted by ‘what FlexiTeam promote’ was the presentation I gave to the team after my trip to the academic International ‘Teleworking’ conference 2001. I was keen to be seen as helpful and productive after all the help the team had given me with my research, so I offered to present some of the main findings from the conference on my return. I interpreted this to mean that I should obviously only present knowledge that would be useful in their consultancy sales process. I did not feel any coercion or control here; this was simply what I assumed to be ‘their job’. Other forms of knowledge would simply not be ‘useful’ to the team. For my presentation, this therefore involved sifting out any research presented at the conference that was not instrumental or positive in its approach. This contrasted with the presentations I was giving at academic conferences that were more complex than a narrow concern with the promotion of telework.

This FlexiTeam-Client-Researcher relationship of course shaped the conduct of the research itself. Only certain questions and conversations were interpreted as socially acceptable and permitted. This obviously has implications for the sort of data that I could feasibly collect during the fieldwork. I did not feel it was appropriate to ask team members overtly critical questions about telework. But just as I am able to undertake a reflexive analysis of the social relationship

²¹ This was not always the case, as the example of Carol’s call to the vet suggested (described in section

between the team and their clients, this did not appear to be the case for FlexiTeam. The reflexive analysis I have just offered of how my subjectivity and knowledge of the social world was shaped by social context did not appear to be a feature of FlexiTeam's discourse about virtual teamwork. The issue of reflexivity explored further in the next section.

5.2.6 Forms of Reflexivity

It is important to be clear about the meaning of the term 'reflexive' as I have used it to describe FlexiTeam's social relationship with their clients. The term 'reflexive' - in the sense I have used it to describe the Team-Client relationship - refers to the ability of actors to reflect upon their actions in the light of their particular social context. For example, Martin described above how he used the concerns of clients about 'teamwork' to reflect upon and inform his own relationships within the team, by making more of a conscious effort to phone Terry. The concerns of clients appeared to be taken onboard by Martin to inform his practices in a reflexive process. Martin also told me how he enrolled his practices to dismiss the concerns of clients and educate them as to 'best practice'. Reflexivity therefore appeared to work 'both ways' as Martin was engaged in a more or less conscious reflexive interaction between practicing and selling teleworking.

There is, however, another meaning of the term 'reflexive', as used in the context of social research (see section 3.4). Reflexivity in social research encourages the researcher to recognise how her data is socially produced and not an objective reflection of the world. This involves recognising that the researcher's presence shapes the very data that is collected. In the case of FlexiTeam, reflexivity in this

second sense of the word may therefore involve recognition of their situated and socially constructed view of virtual teamwork as consultants. In other words, reflexivity could enable the team to discuss openly how their consultancy products (such as questionnaires, space utilisation surveys, interviews and focus groups) operate to construct a certain form of knowledge that supports their promotion and sale of virtual teamwork. This knowledge is not an objective and neutral representation of a client's situation, but is a political and value-laden product that aims to achieve certain social and economic ends.

I did not, on the basis of my (albeit limited) fieldwork experiences, observe the team engaging in reflexivity in this second sense of the term. I did not observe FlexiTeam explicitly render problematic the way in which their sales relationship with clients influenced the way they conceptualised teleworking for clients. Yet their consultancy methods were deliberately designed to generate a 'business case' for implementing teleworking for each and every client, regardless of any resistance in the client organisation such as employees. After all, any outcome other than recommending teleworking would be unfavourable for both the client managers who commissioned the consultancy and antithetical to FlexiTeam's role as a teleworking consultancy.

Having said this, during a conversation with Barry over lunch, it struck me that Barry *did* appear to think reflexively about the knowledge produced by a questionnaire administered by another senior manager in TechnoCo called Sean. I had mentioned that I had met Sean to discuss the findings of a questionnaire about teleworking he had administered to his own workforce. The findings of the questionnaire indicated that teleworkers were working long hours to the detriment of work-life balance. Barry quickly advised me not to trust the reliability of Sean's

findings because the respondents knew that their manager Sean was conducting the survey. Barry explained that the respondents would therefore tend to over-represent the hours they worked, rather than under-estimate and appear lazy in front of their boss.

The second meaning of the term reflexivity recognised here by Barry – how social context can influence the knowledge produced and conclusions drawn – did not seem to be applied to FlexiTeam themselves in my presence. Barry did not apply the reflexive analysis he had just applied to Sean to FlexiTeam’s consultancy methodology. Barry therefore implied that FlexiTeam’s own consultancy instruments were not vulnerable to the same effects of power and politics as the questionnaire administered by Sean. Nevertheless, reflexivity in the second sense of the term was evident in Barry’s description of the *effects* of their relationship with clients upon the team itself. As Barry explained during the same lunch conversation: “*we feel like we must make it [teleworking] work, because if we don’t, how can we sell it to clients?*”.

Yet with regard to this second sense of the term, it seemed that team members largely regarded FlexiTeam’s consultancy methodology as generating objective knowledge. I gathered little data in which team members recognised reflexivity in the sense that social researchers use the term. Alternatively, this reflexivity may not have been an aspect to which I was privy, even during my presence in many of their ‘backstage’ areas away from clients. It must be recognised that team members offered me *situated* narratives, informed by the fact that they were talking to a *researcher*. FlexiTeam’s sales process depends on portraying their consultancy methodology as generating impartial data to place in an objective and rational ‘business case’. It is therefore unlikely that they would explicitly

undermine the objectivity of these methods in front of a researcher who may publish information about the team. It is therefore understandable that I did not gather much data whereby team members questioned and relativised their own consultancy knowledge. Even so, I was surprised that team members rarely engaged in any form of reflexivity about their relationship with clients, for example by 'ironicising' their consultancy products, recognising the constructed nature of their knowledge, or acknowledging the power and politics inherent in the consultancy work they undertook.

As a brief aside, one instance I noted whereby a participant engaged in a reflexive analysis came not from FlexiTeam but from a manager in another TechnoCo department. Brian was one of the managers who expressed an interest in my study, so I met him to talk about his team and my study (he was not subsequently selected to participate in my study, see Methodology section 3.2.1). While we were talking about many of the espoused benefits of teleworking, Brian commented that TechnoCo did not really implement teleworking for social or environmental reasons, although that is indeed what they emphasise in the many company reports on the topic. Brian's theory was that TechnoCo wanted to implement teleworking because it was good for business to show that they could use their own technology to work flexibly. Brian explained that having a teleworking scheme would not only show clients that the technology 'worked' but also hopefully lead to the sale of TechnoCo technology. Brian appeared to be undertaking a reflexive analysis of how the interested position of TechnoCo might lead to the presentation of a particular public view of teleworking.

In summary, the data presented in this section suggested that FlexiTeam's social relationship with clients acts to constitute their subjectivity as 'exemplary virtual

team members'. Team members attempt to construct a legitimate identity with clients by displaying themselves as embodiments of best practice who 'practice what they preach'. This desire to be seen as the personification of their consultancy discourse seems to help make sense of the labour and self-discipline described in the previous Chapter.

5.3 The Team-Employer Relationship

"So that we have survival, survival in the organisation, we're constantly trying to get new clients in."

(Duncan, interview)

Another social relationship that appeared significant in the construction of team members' subjectivity was their relationship with their employing company TechnoCo. This section aims to show how understanding the ways in which FlexiTeam's social relationship with TechnoCo shapes team members' subjectivity may also help to make sense of the labour and discipline described in the previous chapter. In other words, FlexiTeam's identity with their employing company may help us to understand what FlexiTeam does on a daily basis.

FlexiTeam are not a company in their own right - they are situated within an organisational context as employees of TechnoCo. FlexiTeam have an unusual and rather privileged position within TechnoCo. Teleworking consultancy is not a job function decided upon by senior management in the same way other aspects of the organisation are strategically conceived by management. On the contrary, Eric described how he 'sold' the very idea of the teleworking program to senior management when he first joined the firm, and from there arose the possibility of selling consultancy services to external clients (see section 4.1.2). This is a far

cry from traditional Tayloristic work design, in which conception (placed in the hand of management) is removed from execution (as undertaken by the workforce).

This historical legacy leaves FlexiTeam with the privileged position of determining not only the execution of their role but also the very conception of their 'business'. The notion of empowerment – giving workers discretion over how workers conduct their job – is taken to another level in FlexiTeam. The team not only decide how they do their job, but also the very job they do. For example, Kevin not only had the creative license to devise and develop a work-life balance consultancy survey, but the very decision to enter the arena of work-life balance consultancy was made by the team itself. Team members experienced this level of creativity and autonomy as a valued part of the job. Indeed, most team members expressed enjoyment in their work and a great love of their job.

FlexiTeam are also a relatively senior (managerial and professional) grade in the organisation. Team members therefore enjoy a highly paid job with many associated benefits, such as a company car. Although team members do not manage staff (apart from those with line management roles within the team), Nigel explained in our interview that someone his level fifteen years ago would have perhaps a thousand staff under them. FlexiTeam may not manage people, but their high status and remuneration is seen as a reflection of their skills as 'knowledge workers' in managing client relationships.

Most team members attributed the success and status of FlexiTeam to Eric's political skills in negotiating a good status and position for the team. As Kevin explains:

“I was on the [Work-anywhere] program and we were increasingly doing work for external clients and giving that away for nothing, and the then director of [the department] said well, ‘there’s more value in this’. At the same time Eric was clever- he was trying to position the team. We were being pulled in different directions and he said basically ‘we don’t wanna be there, we wanna be basically at the top of the food chain’.”

Team members therefore appear to enjoy and appreciate the privileged autonomy and status as ‘top of the food chain’ in TechnoCo.

5.3.1 Accounting, Accountability and Anxiety

The level of autonomy and status enjoyed by FlexiTeam, however, also seemed to constitute a precarious sense of identity for the team. They are accountable not only to themselves, their team-mates and their clients, but also to the team’s superiors in TechnoCo. This accountability to senior management appeared to constitute a sense of personal responsibility on the part of team members to secure the ‘success’ of the team (as measured in terms of making a profit for the company).

FlexiTeam certainly do not interpret their organisational position in terms of security, stability, success and recognition. The ‘ownership’ of their business also means FlexiTeam are held accountable for the success or otherwise of their consultancy sales. The team perceive an imperative to justify their senior position and high salary to senior management in TechnoCo. The perception regarding the ‘precarious’ nature of FlexiTeam’s identity seems to constitute a constant subjective insecurity. Understanding FlexiTeam’s relationship with their

employers may help us to understand the labour and self-discipline enacted by team members.

TechnoCo's financial accounting metrics construct a particular form of accountability pressure upon the team. The figures of sales revenues versus expenditure (salaries, travel and subsistence etc.) constructed by these metrics are well known to the team members. Although the resulting figures suggest FlexiTeam barely cover their costs, this is interpreted as reflecting the privileged but precarious position of the team relative to other teams in the organisation.

One interviewee highlighted this issue, but requested on tape that this would not be mentioned in my report. (To respect confidentiality, I shall therefore not quote directly the words spoken, but instead put into my own words what was discussed.) The interviewee described how FlexiTeam's sales targets are very low in comparison to others in the organisation. FlexiTeam's annual revenue could even be compared to another team's travel and subsistence budget for a year. The interviewee described how insecure and vulnerable this made team members feel. The interviewee stressed, however, that FlexiTeam are trying to increase their sales volume and "*go up the value chain*".

Nigel explained during our interview, conducted after he had left the team, why this low sales volume constitutes a pressure upon FlexiTeam's status and identity within the organisation as 'an expensive luxury'.

"We are, and I'm not just saying this now I'm out of the team, but we are an expensive luxury. If we worked for any other corporate, we wouldn't be there. Being consultants you are natural fee earners, and we aren't at the moment covering our costs. ... Our salaries as a team come to £x, including cars and technology. This years we're gonna recover that £x, so

we're a cost recovery unit. In terms of ratios we're covering our overheads, but we're not generating profit. Or the profits and revenues that we generate are identified somewhere else it would never be correlated back to us. In real terms, sales managers have 10 people doing £x million each ... We're 10 people covering our costs. I'm sure someone somewhere would rather have 10 people bringing in £x million, rather than this intangible thing, which may or may not be adding value."

From Nigel's narrative it appears that FlexiTeam have to work hard at justifying their very existence in the organisation. Their identity appears to be under threat by virtue of being perceived as a highly paid team who "*aren't at the moment covering our costs*". Nigel recognised how privileged yet precarious their position is – other companies may not even tolerate such a low-revenue team. Part of the issue from Nigel's perspective regards whether FlexiTeam are seen to be 'adding value' to the organisation. Nigel understands the problem to be linked to how FlexiTeam's 'value' is measured.

5.3.2 Measuring 'Value'

Nigel was concerned that, in the current accounting method, the revenue they might be creating was not being attributed to the team: "*the profits ... that we generate would never be correlated back to us*". Nigel feared that FlexiTeam would not be recognised and rewarded if their consultancy led to a client purchasing a large quantity of the company's technology at a later date. As he explained to FlexiTeam's new departmental manager during a team meeting: "*how do you measure and put down tangibly that a client bought the technology only because you gave them the vision?*" Again, while I was sat with Nigel and a TechnoCo account manager waiting to see a potential client, he explained that this presentation might not win any business for FlexiTeam although is likely to

'open doors' for the account manager. Nigel told me how he is not 'targeted' on these activities and so is not recognised and rewarded for his efforts.

This accounting and recognition system applies to the whole team, as well as the individual team members. As Nigel explained in our interview:

"It's the way they're measuring us, ... we can be the catalyst, identifying the need, then they [the client] will need to go and buy loads of technology, and without us they may not do that. There is an indirect benefit, but it's the way we're measured that it's not recognised in the team or in terms of the team targets."

This accounting mechanism appeared to lead to a sense of insecurity regarding the team's identity and profile within the organisation, especially their relationship with those who make the 'strategic' decisions about organisational structure and downsizing. However, Nigel also recognised that this link between their consultancy and the purchase of technology was far from straightforward. This seemed to further his anxiety regarding their identity as a 'value-adding' and hence organisationally viable team.

"On the other hand we've had clients where we've done the £x of consultancy and that's been the end of it. We take them to full feasibility then they stop. They've not done implementation, they've not bought any technology. Where's the value? If we did something a bit creative, if you buy half a million technology at the end it will be discounted by the amount you spent on consultancy. That adds value. You can measure that, but who am I to say."

Due to the less than transparent and deterministic link between their consultancy work and the purchase of technology, Nigel suggests that FlexiTeam's relationship with clients could be altered to make the link to technology sales more explicit. This way their superiors in TechnoCo could more easily measure

the 'added value' brought in by FlexiTeam. In our interview, and indeed in my observations, Nigel spent considerable time and thought considering the justification of the team's status and remuneration within the TechnoCo, even after he had left the team.

Yet within the current accounting system, the primary mechanism for justifying their position, or even their very existence, is through increasing consultancy sales. The target for this anxiety over being recognised, valuable and worthwhile is largely senior management. FlexiTeam work within a target system of sales revenue set by senior management and cascaded down the organisation²². The achievement of these targets is given a central role in the team's narrative about sustaining a valued and worthy identity in the organisation. As Duncan explained:

"So that we have survival, survival in the organisation, we're constantly trying to get new clients in."

As team leader, this pressure to increase sales was felt acutely by Eric. Eric was aware that, for example, although FlexiTeam regard conferences as important for generating new client business, they could also potentially be costly and take team members away from existing client work. Eric had received an email from Beverley, a manager in another department organising a conference, asking him if he would like to send some FlexiTeam members to her conference. In his reply, Eric explained how he felt he must charge Beverley's department to send team members to the event because he is accountable for 'making a profit' from consultancy in order to justify the team's existence in TechnoCo.

²² The targets were particularly important and ambitious this financial year because the company had just publicly reported massive debt.

Beverley,

Next year I am being targeted on making a profit for [the department] from consultancy. This is one of the ways that we can justify our existence to [senior management]. This means I have to be very restrictive about these types of events.

So I am happy to field somebody for all or any of them, but we would need to send you an internal charge fee of £x per session just to cover our costs.

Eric

Being seen to work hard at 'making a profit' by increasing consultancy sales is an important part of the identity work undertaken by FlexiTeam members. This pressure on the legitimacy of their identity as successful (profitable) employees could help to make sense of the self-disciplining and hard-working behaviour described in Chapter 4. Team members strive to be a 'productive' and 'profitable' virtual team in the context of being accountable to their super-ordinates.

Team members appeared to be subject to another related source of anxiety within TechnoCo. Team members interpreted their location in the organisational *structure* as a constant source of insecurity. Being 'top of the food chain', or even still in existence, was seen as far from certain. This anxiety arises from two main sources: organisational restructuring and internal politics and competition.

5.3.3 Organisational Re-engineering, Politics and Competition

Regarding the former, Eric sees part of his role as team leader as 'insulating' the team against organisational restructuring so that the team can carry on with 'business as usual'.

“The team is quite unique, it’s a tightly knit team that’s been around for quite a long time. It just carries on, yeah, we just focus on the business. But where the team sits in the organisation when the organisation is changing all the time, my boss changes all the time - this will have been my third boss in 3 years. But within the team there’s been hardly any change. So one of my jobs is to protect or insulate the team against all this TechnoCo crap.”

However, team members *do* appear to be aware of the potential threats to their identity arising from organisational change. Barry explained the effect that constant restructuring and downsizing has on the team:

“This business changes so quickly you can’t focus on one thing ‘cause that thing might disappear in a year. You’ll never get to the goal ‘cause the goal has disappeared - that part of the organisation doesn’t exist anymore.”

Not only are goals seen to be constantly changing, the team members by no means interpret their jobs as being secure. Even Eric, when describing the uncertainty of the team’s future, included the possibility that *“we could lose our jobs.”* Duncan interpreted this situation as one that engenders insecurity and anxiety about the team’s future.

“Especially ... with the turmoil you’ve always gotta think about the future. Sad to say, but how you’re gonna last for 2 years... For the team, how are we gonna survive, we bounce around, have been reporting to various people. I’ve been through 2 [restructurings] but they were going on 3-4 a year which makes me a little bit nervous.”

Alongside the anxiety generated by constant organisational restructuring, the team members perceived frequent challenges to their identity as a result of inter-departmental politics and competition. Team members complained of other groups attempting to ‘take over’ control of FlexiTeam’s work, or becoming rivals by entering the same line of business. Team members interpreted all of the above situations as a threat to their identity and status within the organisation.

For example, during his leaving party, Eric told me that Kevin in particular is verging on 'paranoid' in his insistence that FlexiTeam could get taken over by another consultancy division of TechnoCo. It was feared that being 'swallowed up' by a larger group would result in a reduction of autonomy and the relinquishing of ownership and control of their 'intellectual property', such as consultancy products and knowledge of clients. Eric himself stated in our interview, regarding the future of the team:

"Another scenario is that the team gets squashed off by somebody who's building up an offensive position at the rear that I'm not aware of."

Team members often used militaristic 'battle' metaphors such as this to describe the political manoeuvrings within TechnoCo. However, other parts of the organisation are not always in an 'offensive' relationship to FlexiTeam. Other groups have also approached FlexiTeam with a view to 'partnering' on client projects. Nevertheless, team members tended to interpret many such moves as subjective threats to their status and identity. Kevin told me a story of how the team reacted when another TechnoCo group – 'Product Development' – asked if they could work together in partnership.

"Product Development thought they could do flexible working consultancy, but we had the track record internally, the story to tell. They wanted us to go in with them, but we said 'no thank you very much, we're in a better position where we are'. They asked 'can we meet to discuss how we can work together?', we said 'sure'. But they were after our information and knowledge, and not working collaboratively. Product Development also had a bad reputation so you don't wanna be tarred with that same brush."

Team members were keen to protect the knowledge and 'story' they saw as crucial to their organisational identity and their identity with clients. They

interpreted intra-organisational collaboration as a potential threat to their ownership of this knowledge, and therefore their organisational standing. Retaining exclusive rights over their 'intellectual capital' was a major preoccupation for FlexiTeam. For example, when Barry told me about the excessive workload the team were currently experiencing, I suggested they hire in temporary help from staff in another TechnoCo department. Barry explained why FlexiTeam are reluctant to do this. He told me that these outsiders could then learn how to replicate their consultancy process and products, leaving the client with no reason to choose FlexiTeam over others. Again, on a different occasion, Barry sent the following email to the group in reply to a discussion about partnering with an internal group. He warns his team-mates of his previous experience when FlexiTeam tried to partner with the internal group 'Applications Development':

```
Guys .

Beware also !! Applications Development and my
experience with Client1. ...

Applications Development will treat us as a
supplier of information, and nick out
Intellectual Capital then sell it to client for
x2 or 3 what we would charge them. When Georgina
asked about how we were going to get paid for
our resource Applications Development had not
considered paying us for it!.

Barry
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Retaining exclusive rights to their "Intellectual Capital" is seen as important for maintaining both their organisational status and their identity with clients (see section 5.2 above).

5.3.4 Organisational Profile

It appeared that FlexiTeam were greatly concerned to retain their organisational status. Related to this was the profile of FlexiTeam in the organisation. When they were based in the smaller property department, the team felt that they were both well known and highly regarded. Having moved into the larger sales group, team members feared that their reputation and profile was thereby reduced. As Nigel commented to Eric in their review meeting: *“we were ‘something’ in property, ten people out of a few hundred, but now we are probably ‘nothing’ in the big scheme of things”*.

For exactly this reason, it seems, team members appeared to act as ‘ambassadors’ and ‘publicists’ of FlexiTeam within TechnoCo. Team members spend considerable time publicising and promoting FlexiTeam internally. For example, during one team meeting they discussed the importance of getting a prominent story on the TechnoCo Intranet website so that employees within TechnoCo could be made aware of their existence and their role. FlexiTeam view their organisational profile and reputation as important because many ‘leads’ to potential clients are sourced from account managers in various parts of TechnoCo. In such a large and complex organisation as TechnoCo, when account managers are not aware of FlexiTeam they may route a query about flexible working to the property division or another consultancy division, meaning FlexiTeam lose out on potential business.

Given the amount of identity work team members undertake in order to maintain their team’s organisational position, the question remaining is why team members personally take onboard the ‘internal struggle’ to this extent? Indeed, as described above, team members often acted as ‘defenders of the team’ within the organisation - fighting off competition, promoting the team, justifying their highly

paid managerial status and so on. For example, Kevin ‘talked up’ the value of the team to the organisation to a visitor at one team meeting: *“around this table is a unique set of skills which are rare, in the country not just TechnoCo, and we need recognition for that.”*

Eric reasoned that team members’ identity is largely constituted by the success or otherwise of the team they work for. To be part of a team that was, for example, disbanded because it was deemed to be failing to make sufficient profit may be viewed as a threat to team members’ identity as competent professionals²³. As stated simply by Eric in our interview:

“Everyone wants to be part of a winning team.”

Understanding the relationship between FlexiTeam and TechnoCo clearly helps to develop an understanding of the social dynamics that shape the hard-working and self-disciplining behaviour of team members described in Chapter 4. FlexiTeam are accountable for making a profit and demonstrating their ‘added value’, experience threats from organisational restructuring, politics and competition, and strive to maintain their profile and status within such a large organisation.

In this context of constant threats to the legitimacy of their organisational identity, team members appeared to experience a subjective pressure work hard to secure the very survival of the team and their jobs, in addition to maintaining their ‘privileged’ position and status. The insecurity of their identity within TechnoCo appeared to bolster their identification with the ‘best interests’ of the team. Thus,

²³ The relationship between the success of the team and team members’ self-identity, in terms of the hard work they put into the former in service of the latter, is explored further in section 6.3.

who FlexiTeam *are* in their employing organisation seemed to play a part in shaping what they *do* on a day-to-day basis – the hard work and self-discipline described in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 described the conscious and conscientious effort on the part of team members to act as ‘good (virtual) team members’. Identification with being a ‘*team*’ is clearly an important part of FlexiTeam’s identity. Interaction between team members may therefore be an important aspect of the constitution of team members’ subjectivity. The third and final social relation to be considered is therefore the relationship between team members themselves – the intra-team relationship. The next section shall consider how the interactions between team members appear to play a significant role in constructing team members’ subjectivity. The format of this section is slightly different to the previous two sections because in this case FlexiTeam have their own theories about how this intra-relationship operates. FlexiTeam’s (emic) theory shall first be reviewed and critiqued before moving on to explore the researcher’s own (etic) theory of the intra-team relationship.

5.4 The Intra-Team Relationship

“It’s quite critical that you’re seen to muck in and do what you can, where your skills lie.”

(Terry, interview)

FlexiTeam have no explicit theories to conceptualise their relationship to clients or TechnoCo. When it comes to the intra-team relationship, however, FlexiTeam have a clear paradigm for prescribing how this relationship does and should operate. FlexiTeam have their own interpretation of how and why the labour and

discipline I described in Chapter 4 is achieved. This is, after all, the very stuff of their consultancy work – advising clients on how to achieve ‘best practice’ virtual teamwork.

FlexiTeam clearly state in their consultancy advice that *targets* are the key to securing self-disciplined and focussed work behaviour from the dispersed team members. This section therefore begins by outlining the ways in which FlexiTeam link the target system to the successful achievement of management control and employee commitment (5.4.1) – the same issues highlighted as significant in the literature review (see section 2.1.4). The target system is thought to ensure that an adequate amount of work effort is expended on the correct (managerially-defined) tasks. In addition, the target system includes a *shared* target element that the team believe promotes team-oriented behaviour (5.4.2). In other words, the team see themselves as successful because they implement the ‘best practice’ described in the practitioner literature (section 2.1.4) and in their own consultancy advice.

However, this section also considers comments by the team members themselves that call into question the effectiveness of the target system as an explanation of their work behaviour (5.4.3). This section therefore aims to go beyond the economic-rationality of the target system by examining data regarding the *social relationships* within the team (5.4.4). This focuses upon the role of peer surveillance and the concepts of trust, expertise, adding value and visibility in generating normative control within FlexiTeam.

5.4.1 Targets and Discipline

A significant theme in practitioner literature was the problem of management control (2.1.4). Virtual teamwork was understood to disrupt the forms of discipline that take place in office environments. Managers of virtual teams are not able to informally monitor the work activities of virtual team members as they could by 'walking around' a co-located team. Furthermore, surveillance methods of control were seen as culturally incompatible with the 'trust' required for effective virtual teamwork (section 2.1.5).

The problem posed for the virtual team manager was therefore how do you ensure the discipline of workers that you cannot see? FlexiTeam consider the target system they have developed, with its associated system of bonus payments, to generate effectively disciplined and focussed work behaviour from a distance. As described in the scenario (section 4.2):

"Bonus-related targets ensure that dispersed team members keep focussed on the tasks they are rewarded on. By managing-by-objectives, the distance manager can keep track on the teleworker's progress without having to 'look over your shoulder'. Trust, empowerment and reward prove to be far better motivators than mistrust, surveillance and punishment."

The discussion shall first detail how FlexiTeam understand their target system to work, before moving on to present a critique of this system and thus develop an alternative understanding.

Targets comprise a set of business objectives assigned to each employee that are linked to a bonus system of remuneration. Put simply, each employee is paid a bonus on the basis of the number of objectives he or she is said to have achieved. Targets are reviewed on a monthly basis during the 'review meeting'

held between the employee and his or her line manager. Targets are a company-wide process in the sense that they are applied to all managerial and professional grade employees.

Nevertheless, targets have a distinct meaning for FlexiTeam concerning their status as a dispersed team. FlexiTeam understand the target system to play an important role in ensuring that work behaviour remains focussed (towards the achievement of the objectives) in the absence of direct, co-present supervision. In short, targets are thought to enable FlexiTeam to achieve effective 'discipline at a distance'.

From the perspective of management, targets are understood to offer a means of control over the work behaviour of the dispersed team members. Eric, the team leader, explained to me what he hopes to achieve when he designs the targets for the entire team:

"Getting it right is very important. It has to install the right characteristics in the team. If there wasn't [targets], certain people would still do certain things, but you wanna try and focus them in certain areas. Actually we don't want you to do this any more, but we repay you if you do this."

Targets are not only understood to shape and control the behaviour of dispersed workers but also ensure their management is fair and equitable. I learnt about this aspect of the targets when I was asked to do some work for Georgina in return for the help FlexiTeam had given me during my fieldwork. She asked me to write a short piece about 'tips for teleworkers on managing their careers' for the training package they were developing, with a view to selling the product to clients. I was more than happy to help Georgina but was unsure what she wanted me to write.

We both knew of the concern that teleworking could be detrimental to career

prospects, from research showing teleworkers expressing a fear of being 'out of sight, out of mind', but I was unsure of what advice I should be writing about. Georgina helped me out and explained what the overall message should be: "*you know, how career concerns shouldn't be a problem if you manage by objectives*" (see Appendix 3 for the piece I subsequently wrote for Georgina).

Darren explained in his interview how the targets ensure a fair and equitable distribution of work between the team members:

"Each individual's objectives are visible to all of us. I know what Kevin's are, he knows what mine are... They're just available, they're on the shared folders. Martin will send an email out saying we've agreed all the objectives this year and here they are. Which is good, so there's no sort of, er 'I'm doing more than they are', 'they're getting an easy ride'. That works well."

Targets are thereby seen as 'objective' and thought to secure a meritocratic system of reward and remuneration – a benefit for employees as well as the organisation.

Team members did indeed account for the target process in largely beneficial terms. For example, while I was chatting with Darren after I had asked all my interview questions, he highlighted the target system as one of the processes he thought was central to making virtual teamwork successful. He described how the target system developed within FlexiTeam and the benefits he feels he gains from working towards clearly defined (as opposed to 'woolly') targets:

"Because that's the thing really:- if they're woolly, then you never know whether you're doing the right thing. That's come on, that's evolved over time within the group. When I first started - it's not a criticism of Eric, 'cause it was a new area anyway - but Eric at that time was very much like

“hot-desks, that’s yours”, and off we go. It wasn’t “you will roll out 12 hot-desk centres over the next 12 months”... It was early days, and from there you develop: ‘oh hang on, we need a process for that’... I hate process working, but in the area that we’re in - and for any team that works in the way we do - you need something there, some sort of framework that you can work to.”

Barry expressed a similar appreciation of the target process when I asked him how the relationships within the team are managed.

“Personally I think you’ve gotta have a process, to get things done. That process means to us that ... we’re gonna have regular review meetings with Eric, we know there’s a formal way that we’re appraised and rewarded:- all those help the relationship work. It’s a framework upon which the relationships are built.”

These accounts portray a robust system of targets that support their dispersed working arrangement. Targets are presented in these accounts as a framework that ensures dispersed team members ‘do the right thing’ and build effective and profitable working relationships while teleworking. It is not surprising that I was to gather this data. After all, these are the very same narratives team members recall on an everyday basis in their consultancy work. They advise clients about how to achieve ‘successful’ virtual teamwork, taking clients through the ‘learning curve’ FlexiTeam have supposedly already taken themselves and TechnoCo through. Team members were unsurprisingly well versed at offering these narratives and extolling the virtues of their ‘best practice’ processes.

One important aspect of the target process not yet discussed is the distinction between shared and individual targets. The significance of *shared* targets for encouraging ‘team-working’ shall now be examined.

5.4.2 Shared Targets and Teamwork

FlexiTeam identify strongly with the notion of being a 'team' as opposed to a set of individuals categorised into a grouping for administrative purposes, such as a sales account team. They sharply distinguish themselves from other sales employees who are rewarded on the basis of sales they achieve from the client relationships they 'own' within their designated 'patch' of the country. As Barry explained:

"None of us get individually incentivised... We made a decision as a team that we can't work like that. You're not a sales person with an account. We don't own our accounts."

Throughout my ethnography I noted utterances and actions that confirmed this sense of being a 'team'. For example, Carol once commented that she feels that FlexiTeam are more like a family than a team, which I took to indicate the strength of relationship they feel with each other. A discussion at the end of one of the weekly audio-conferences also stuck in my mind about teamwork. Nigel 'stayed on' at the end of the audio to talk to Kevin about a client he was going to visit that week. Nigel spent over a quarter of an hour giving Kevin tips and background about the client. I noted at the time what a good instance of 'virtual teamwork' this was.

This 'team' philosophy is reflected in their target system. In addition to their individual objectives, FlexiTeam have shared targets of consultancy revenue they must achieve *as a team* for all members to get that part of their bonus payment.

Shared targets were depicted in the scenario (section 4.2) as creating "a team atmosphere whereby members work together to solve problems and all contribute to team projects". Similarly, the practitioner

literature (2.1) depicted the benefits that are thought to be derived from having group-based reward systems:

“Group tasks promote *cooperation* that is strengthened by joint rewards. When they are in the mode of cooperation, people assume that everything is fair and that they will be rewarded accordingly. They pool their talents, offering and using individual skills and competencies as needed by the tasks.”

(Lipnack and Stamps, 1997: 148 emphasis in original)

The practitioner literature makes a clear link between shared targets and teamwork behaviour. This section describes how FlexiTeam in particular account for the link between shared targets and teamwork. The discussion then proceeds to critique this account and present an alternative analysis that focuses on social relationships, discourse and subjectivity.

The team leader, Eric, described in our interview how he understood shared targets to be crucial for reinforcing team-working behaviour.

“It’s getting the right balance between teamwork and team pulling together and team rewards and team recognition, and individual achievement.”

Darren explained in more detail during our interview how he thinks this shared target system works to shape their behaviour towards teamwork.

“If anyone fails within their area it could affect the team objective. So it’s in everyone’s interest to help everyone achieve their objectives. ... If there’s a team target - a good example may be speaking at 20 national events, everyone’s got 4 - and it’s the back end of the year and someone’s not quite there, they haven’t had the opportunities for some reason. If you don’t hit it as a team, then that’s gonna affect all your bonuses. It would be in your interest to help someone get along to do those presentations.”

Terry accounts for this shared target system in terms of the benefits it has for the dynamics within the team. The emphasis is upon what the team as a whole achieve as opposed to 'pointing fingers' at which individuals brought in what business.

"One of the good things about the team is that we work on a communal target basis. Although we've got individual objectives which I'm paid on, most of the teams' targets are team targets. So nobody's pointing fingers and saying - well we'd soon know if you were contributing nothing - but nobody's bothered about 'you brought that in but not that'."

Terry reasons that the shared target system is fairer than a system whereby individuals are singled out for their contribution. This aspect may be particularly pertinent to Terry due to his geographical disadvantage of being located in Scotland. He is near fewer large corporate clients than his team-mates based in the south-east of England. Shared targets therefore enable his contribution to be recognised and rewarded in spite of sometimes not directly winning business. This contrasts with a purely individualised target system whereby this contribution may be left un-rewarded. For Terry, this would hardly act as an incentive for him to be a 'team player' and help the collective goals of the team.

The story thus far portrays a system of targets that is functional, fair and effective in shaping disciplined, team-oriented work behaviour from team members. FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse clearly presents a rational-economic theory of how and why team members act in a self-disciplined manner. Technologies, coupled with 'best practice' management processes such as 'managing-by-objectives', are understood to secure successful virtual teamwork. This appears to verify the prescription given in practitioner literature on managing virtual teams (see literature review section 2.1).

However, the story may not be this simple. Team members themselves cast doubt upon the effectiveness of targets for disciplining their work behaviour. As one team member put it, targets help to guide their work activities, but they do not account for *“the rest of the stuff”*. This includes the work team members undertake that is not included in their targets, and moreover the difficulty of determining what targets mean and how to measure them.

Further, discussion is needed of the extent to which shared targets can be said to be both equitable and effective in shaping team-oriented behaviour. The next section takes up the challenge of addressing these issues that are omitted from the instrumentally-rational prescription about targets described in the literature review (section 2.1.4).

5.4.3 Targets: Discipline at a Distance?

This section shall discuss the possible limitations and problems with employing the target system for understanding the self-disciplined behaviour of team members. This is necessary in order to establish the need for the alternative understanding developed in this thesis. To be clear, it is not suggested that targets have no influence on how team members shape their subjectivity. As discussed in the literature review, Knights and Morgan's (1991a) study of subjectivity in life insurance sales suggested that financial targets did constitute a significant disciplinary power for those whose identity was configured through these measures. Similarly, du Gay (2000) and Deetz (1998) argue that the reconfiguration of organisations into 'quasi-markets', 'cost centres' and 'budget

holders' operates on a collective scale in a similar manner to generate self-disciplined behaviour.

The point is not, therefore, that targets are inert in the exercise of disciplinary power. Rather, targets are only one way of exploring the dynamics of relationships within the team. The target system is already well documented in the literature (see section 2.1.4) and articulated by FlexiTeam in their consultancy work with clients. Yet, as the team members themselves pointed out, they only go some way towards making sense of the practices of team members. It is these limitations to the power of the target system – articulated along four lines of critique – that shall now be considered. This critique aims to establish the need for the additional analysis, based on the social relationships within the team, presented later.

1. *'The Rest of the Stuff'*

The first aspect of the target system that fails to adequately account for the behaviour of team members regards the work activities undertaken that are not even included in their targets. Team members are acutely aware that the sum of their work activities does not straightforwardly equate to the sum of their targets. The target system fails to account for what Kevin termed "*the rest of the stuff*". He explained to me how the complex work of consultants could not be adequately captured in quantitative targets suitable to those "*counting beans or writing lines of code*":

"If you were counting beans or writing lines of code it would be easy, but we're not and a lot of what we're doing is about relationships. So on the one hand we need to clear off the formal objectives, 'cause that's what we get paid to do, but it's also about the rest of the stuff."

Similarly, when I asked Georgina if she felt it was clear that you've met your targets, she replied:

“Very clear. The only thing is if you do things that aren't in your objectives. If we were completely focussed, we wouldn't actually achieve half the things we do.”

Georgina and Kevin both point out that the team would not achieve what they do if they religiously adhered to what was specified in the targets. This is the first problem with the target system as an explanation of team members' disciplined behaviour.

2. Definition and Measurement

The second aspect of the target system that fails to account adequately for team members' self-disciplined behaviour is that the targets themselves may be less than straightforwardly defined and measured. Other team members offered accounts that run contrary to Georgina's statement that targets are 'very clear'. For example, Nigel tried to explain how he understands his performance to be evaluated but concedes that it is quite complicated and *“could go on for hours!”*. During the conversation that ensued, I asked him what the target 'client relationships' means. He explained:

“You had to identify that you had established relationships with major corporate clients who weren't historically your clients. Not easy, and not easy to measure.”

A recurring discussion during my fieldwork concerned the target on 'partnerships' introduced this financial year. As Darren acknowledged in our interview about this recent addition to their targets:

“Partnerships is on there this time, although we’re still trying to establish what that is gonna mean. I’m not sure what the definitions of a partnership are.”

Precisely, this new addition generated much discussion at the subsequent team meeting:

- Nigel: *“What local government consider to be partnerships has got sod all to do with what other people call to be partnerships.”*
- Martin: *“Isn’t it a way of securing revenue for a number of years?” ...*
- Eric: *“We need a session on our targets don’t we.”*
- Barry: *“I think that the new Partnerships Department will not mean we can’t do partnerships, we just need to go to the partnerships team and say ‘we think this is a really great partnership, you go and make it happen’.” ...*
- Eric: *“We need to think about what our targets are for the next year, and how we measure that.”*

Targets can hardly be said to achieve effective disciplinary power if the meaning of the target itself is not even clear to team members, as this discussion shows. Only when the target has meaning for the team members can it be translated into a means for informing their work behaviour while apart.

The team manager Eric recognised only too well the difficulties in placing measures onto complex work behaviours. Eric, along with the other senior team member Martin, decided that ‘knowledge sharing’ should be included in the target process of the next financial year. They thought it was crucial that knowledge sharing should be officially encouraged because this was one aspect of teamwork that some critics, including many potential clients, understand to be adversely affected by virtual teamwork. For example, the potential client Barry visited singled out knowledge sharing as her single greatest concern (see section 5.2.1).

However, Eric admitted to Barry during their review meeting that himself and Martin had failed to construct an adequate measure of 'knowledge sharing'. A measurement system would be necessary in order for the target to become quantitatively and objectively linked to a bonus payment scale. In fact, later in the conversation Barry acknowledged that they already 'do' good knowledge sharing without these measures in place. This suggests it may be social processes within the team aside from quantitative targets that shape team members' already 'successful' knowledge sharing behaviour. This alternative account will be elaborated later.

3. Ethics and Efficacy

The third element of targets that requires critical questioning is the assumption that team targets produce fair and balanced team-working behaviour. Shared targets may include the danger of having '*free loaders*' who do not '*pull their weight*' within the team. Eric was aware of this 'downside' to the shared targets, although overall he values them for their positive reinforcement of team-oriented behaviour. He explains:

"There's also the danger of having 'free riders' or 'free loaders' or whatever you want to call them. The team's doing really well and there's one guy not pulling his weight, but he gets paid just the same 'cause the team does really well."

This aspect of shared targets was a pre-occupation for Kevin in particular. During our interview he engaged in a reflexive dialogue about the problems he perceives when team members do not equally '*pull their weight*'.

"Is it better to be a high performer in a low performing team? Or a low performer in a high performing team? The former you'll bust your gut but will only get your personal objectives. The latter you benefit from someone else's strong work. If everyone pulled their weight equally you'd be OK, but

we're in a team where some people do and some people don't. It's a fact of life."

The target system hardly encourages 'teamwork' behaviour from the distance workers if the perception is that 'busting their gut' only leads to others benefiting from their hard work. The target system is hereby thought to fall short of ensuring disciplined teleworker behaviour that is directed towards the benefit of the team. What Terry saw a positive because nobody is "*pointing fingers*" (section 5.4.2 above), Kevin sees as a (somewhat inevitable) downside to shared targets because those who do not "*pull their weight*" are seen to receive the same bonus payments.

Yet Terry's account also included a revealing statement - that the team would "*soon know if [a team member] was contributing nothing*" (see section 5.4.2). This suggests a more informal social process of peer monitoring that operates to evaluate each member's contribution to the team. This argument is explored further in the next section.

4. Motivation

The fourth and final element that serves to complicate the functional and rational story about targets (see section 5.4.1 and 5.4.2) questions the extent to which pay-related targets can in fact be said to influence work behaviour. Team members themselves question the theory that motivation is a rational-economic calculation. When I asked Georgina if the bonuses acted as incentives, she replied:

"The fact that I get a bonus doesn't make me work any harder. I'd do it anyway. It's not all about money. The money's nice, lovely, but it doesn't make me do more than I would do normally."

In rejecting the economic-rationality of targets as generating motivation through monetary incentives, Georgina's statement therefore poses the question of how we are to understand why she would 'normally' work hard? Equally, an appreciation of what social processes underlie Darren's identification with wanting to know whether he is "*doing the right thing*" (see section 5.4.1) – where targets are just one source of from which he learns how best to *self-direct* his work behaviour – needs to go beyond the rational-economic target system.

A promising line of enquiry that emerged from my data analysis regarded the normative effects of intra-team social relationships. The next section examines data from my fieldwork regarding intra-team relationships that suggests the importance of subjectivity and normative power in securing 'discipline at a distance'.

5.4.4 The Normative Power of Peer Surveillance

The argument developed in this section focuses on the social relationships within the team. It will be argued that peer surveillance serves as a powerful disciplinary mechanism for evaluating the legitimacy of each team member's position in the team. Not only do team members seem to be expected to bring unique expertise to the team, they also seem to be expected to 'go the extra mile' for their team mates in accordance with the 'trust' discourse constructed by the team. In other words, what counts in sustaining a legitimate identity does not appear to be simply meeting the individual and team targets, but also constantly demonstrating your commitment and value to the team.

Further, it will be argued that FlexiTeam construct 'selling yourself' and 'maintaining visibility' as the primary mechanisms for judging work effort and offering reward and recognition in virtual teams. It is suggested that the consequence of this 'visibility' system is that the 'self promotion' workload is 'individualised', including the liability for any perceived imbalance between effort and reward.

1. Going the Extra Mile

I have already outlined the extent to which FlexiTeam identify with being a 'team' as opposed to merely a group of people (see section 5.4.2). This 'team' identity is appreciated by many of the team members for its personal benefits. Barry explained the benefits he derives from working as part of a team:

"I can't work without teams ... I need people to bounce ideas off. ... It's about being in a team, getting energy from the team and giving energy to the team."

Similarly, Carol describes the emotional support she gives and receives as part of FlexiTeam:

"I think it's really important if you can get support and friendship from your team members. ... It's nice to be on the other side, and be supportive to somebody. And have people there to support you. And that's so important in a team - we're all human, we're not robots after all are we. We're not robots, we're people, and people are complicated things."

However, this 'team identity' also has implications for the way in which members are expected to behave towards one another. As Kevin expressed above (5.4.3), team members can feel aggrieved if they are working harder than their teammates. Eric also recognised this problem, using the term 'free riders' to describe

this issue. Considerable expectations and pressure is therefore placed on members to show that they are contributing adequately. Darren explained in our interview:

“... If you’re not gonna pull your weight and be committed to the team or your own individual job then you’re not going to survive.”

When I then asked Darren what he saw as important for success in his career, he immediately translated his personal standards of ‘commitment’ into a team standard he also expects from his team-mates.

“For me, if you can demonstrate commitment - and I hate to use the phrase, but ‘go the extra mile’ - I think that’s the best you can get out of anyone. That’s what I look for when I work with people as well. Would they do that for me and would I do that for them? ... If something needs doing, a report or proposal or bid and it means working through the night to do it, then I’ll do it ... If it means someone can’t do something -for whatever reason - and you’ve got to step in last minute, then I’d do it. And I’d like to think that the people around me would do the same.”

Darren’s account shows how important it is for him to feel that his team-mates would also ‘go the extra mile’ for him in a reciprocal ‘trust’ relationship. He would ‘cover’ an event they could not make and would like to think they would do the same for him.

These expectations are performed in their everyday work when they publicly offer to help a team-mate or thank other team-mates for their help. For example, the conversation about email initiated by Carol at a team meeting (see section 4.3.4) included a comment by Terry that explicitly detailed how this social pressure might operate. Terry explained that when he replies back to the whole group rather than the individual saying that he himself is not free to ‘cover’ the event, he

hopes this might 'encourage' others to offer their help when they see the team is relying on them.

2. *The Social Consequences of 'Trust'*

The discourse of 'trust' appeared to play an important role in shaping team members subjectivity. Trust is presented in the practitioner literature as both under threat in virtual teams, but crucially also the 'glue' that holds virtual teams together (see section 2.1.5). The concern of this thesis is not with defining what trust 'is' or how it can be engineered or managed. The interesting aspect of 'trust' for this thesis is the meaning it has for FlexiTeam, and in particular the social consequences of their use of this discourse. In short, what is interesting is what the discourse of trust *does*. FlexiTeam's discourse of 'trust' appeared to constitute a subjective pressure on team members to perform being 'trustworthy' in order to sustain a legitimate identity in the team.

The practitioner literature outlined the desired behaviours on the part of virtual team members to engender rather than endanger 'trust'. Lipnack and Stamps (1997: 225) argue that "trust is a need-to-have quality in productive relationships" of the "virtual teams of the Information Age". The authors advise virtual team members to demonstrate performance, competence, integrity and a concern for the well-being of others in order to engender trust. Viewing this as a *discourse* enables us to see how it might normalise team members' *subjectivity* and secure *self-discipline* on the part of team members. Indeed, the researcher experienced a similar dynamic when I encountered FlexiTeam's specific discourse of 'trust'.

I learnt the lesson about the importance of 'trust' and appropriate conduct early on in my fieldwork. Before taping the first team meeting I attended, I attempted to

read out the 'code of ethics and confidentiality' I had written. But I was stopped short by Nigel who was chairing the meeting when he joked 'do we trust her?' – others laughed and said yes – and the meeting carried on. I followed up this meeting by sending an email with the 'code of ethics' attached because I did not finish it at the meeting. I soon learnt why I was stopped short at the team meeting by the email reply from Barry:

Andrea,

It may be nothing, but I think you may be hitting the in-built trust mechanism which makes this team work, and is a pre-requisite for good flexible working. You have tried to get us 'interested' in the Ethics guide, but you have verbally outlined it, and that's good enough for the team. Don't take it as a criticism, we come upon this regularly when we deal with clients.

My belief is that the psychological contract between the employee and their colleagues and the company changes i.e. You trust me to work when you cannot see me, therefore to repay that trust I will work harder and trust others more, because I am being trusted....a virtuous circle. This is the circle we try to create with our clients. However, it is worth noting that if this trust is broken, I believe it is harder to regain than in a conventional working environment!

Sorry, reading this back it looks like a lecture, and you have forgotten more about psychology than I know!

But it may be something, you can enlarge upon as part of your research?

Barry states that the 'trust mechanism' is what he believes 'makes this team work' and therefore I would also be best advised to follow this manner of behaviour. The formality and caution with which I proceeded at first, adhering to what I understood to be ethical research practice, was interpreted by FlexiTeam to be at odds with this 'trust' mechanism. I was trusted to conduct my research, and in

return I would therefore 'work harder' for the good of the team, creating a virtuous circle. This is presumably also in the knowledge of the caveat that 'breaking' this trust would also have consequences for the viability of my research relationship with the team.

I interpreted this interaction with the team's discourse of 'trust' as a social obligation to construct an identity as a competent and 'trustworthy' team member. My 'trustworthiness' had to be demonstrated in my behaviour, not written in a 'code'. The viability of my position on the team seemed to therefore depend on my ability to demonstrate the value of my work for the team. Indeed, this pressure to contribute to the team was reiterated in a more explicit manner by Martin later on in my fieldwork.

Martin had recently taken over leadership of the team after Eric left and 'called me in' to discuss my research. Martin expressed his dissatisfaction with my position on the team because he had noted my failure to contribute to the discussion at team meetings²⁴. He told me how he thought to himself "*why should this person be in the team when they are not adding to the discussion?*". Indeed, I noticed from the start that my preferred position as an 'observer' was reconstructed by team members to be 'participant' when early on in the team meetings they started asking for my opinion and including me in the 'individual update' slots.

This invitation to participate tended to make me feel anxious and 'put on the spot' rather than happy to be included. Although I was eager to 'do the right thing' by contributing in this respect, I did not feel I could perform a competent identity

given my limited ethnographic experience of the team. I barely understood at this early stage what the topics being discussed were about; let alone what an appropriate (practical rather than academic) response might be. It was moreover difficult to juggle this participation role with the diligent note taking I was also attempting. Yet the team's discourse of trust suggested that I had to earn their trust, not through a 'code of ethics' but by demonstrating my trustworthiness and commitment to the team. As Lipnack and Stamps (1997) stressed in the practitioner literature review, trust is earned by demonstrating performance, competence, integrity and a concern for the well-being of others. This discourse had social consequences for the legitimacy of my position within the team.

3. Demonstrating Value and Expertise

As I learnt above, demonstrating early on the 'value' you add to the team is crucial for the construction of a legitimate identity within FlexiTeam. Martin made me aware of the importance he ascribes to judging my 'value' in our discussion described above. Similarly, Darren explained in our interview:

"... if you move into a new business they wouldn't suffer you for long, they haven't got time for you to learn."

Alongside the pressure to contribute goes the importance of being seen to bring some form of 'expertise' to FlexiTeam. A team member's contribution appears to be highly valued when it is understood to involve a form of unique 'expertise', a skill not possessed by other members. FlexiTeam define their team according to the popular notion of a team as comprising a 'group of experts'. In the practitioner literature (section 2.1.3), Duarte and Snyder (2001) used the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle, where every team member has one piece. Virtual teamwork is

²⁴ It is interesting to note that my failure to contribute to the team virtually (via email or audio-conferences)

therefore about bringing the team together to complete the puzzle. As Lipnack and Stamps (1997: 74) stated in the practitioner literature review:

“People with needed expertise and knowledge have power to the degree to which the work requires them. ... Everyone on a virtual team is or should be expert in something needed for the group to accomplish their work.”

This understanding does not simply describe the characteristics of successful virtual teams. The interest for this thesis is not in defining the expertise of FlexiTeam members or prescribing how to integrate this effectively. The interest lies in exploring what their identification with being a ‘group of experts’ *does*. It will be argued that FlexiTeam’s identification with being a ‘group of experts’ has *social consequences* through its implications for team members’ *subjectivity*. To become a legitimate member of FlexiTeam it appears to be imperative that you are seen to bring relevant ‘expertise’ to the team. It is understandable that my identity as a team member was precarious to say the least. What form of expertise could I bring to FlexiTeam, given their explicit dislike of ‘academic’ knowledge?

FlexiTeam’s identification with being a ‘group of experts’ was particularly evident during the team meeting where they brought in an external consultant to trial a ‘work-style’ personality questionnaire. This questionnaire produced a description of each team member’s ‘work-style’ using one of four colours. The team identified with these colours as an accurate representation and stressed the importance of a balance of different colours (read ‘forms of expertise’) to the effectiveness of the team. Team members even started talking about their preferences for the new

members who would fill the vacancies left by Eric and Nigel in terms of the colours they think would balance the team better.

Indeed, after the meeting Barry explained to me how he thinks these 'colours' make FlexiTeam a successful dispersed team. Barry told me about when the team decided to develop a new business card on a CDROM. The team members first of all got together for a brainstorming day to decide a way forward. Nigel would add then ideas for gimmicks, Georgina would add ideas for the content, Kevin would help on the technical side and Martin would be pragmatic and devise of plan of action. The team members would then work at the parts they had been allocated from home, send their completed work to Barry who compiled it.

Barry told me how much he valued having such a wide range of expertise around him on the team. He said that he had actually thought about writing an article describing this example as a case study of 'good virtual teamwork'. The team-client relationship in promoting virtual teamwork again appears significant in this story. Barry's story can also be interpreted as constituting an identity pressure on team members to demonstrate they have relevant and useful expertise. Barry's pride in the hard work and expertise of his team-mates could be seen to also imply a pressure to maintain a 'valuable' and 'expert' identity. This dynamic may be elucidated and explored in more depth by examining a case where this demonstration of 'added value' was critical – the case of Terry.

4. The Case of Terry

FlexiTeam have their own understandings about how to secure contributions from distanced virtual team members. In their own consultancy advice, they stress the importance of using technologies such as email and the telephone to

communicate, and the role of shared targets in fostering teamwork. Similarly, the practitioner literature depicted the correct use of technologies (section 2.1.2), along with the 'best practice' management processes, such as the target system (section 2.1.4), as the solution to the 'problem' of virtual teamwork. This was mirrored in the scenario (section 4.2), which depicted technology and targets as enabling team member Terry to contribute fully 'from a distance' to FlexiTeam, and in return derive all the benefits and support of being a member of a 'team':

"The fact that Terry is based in Scotland was not a barrier to collaboration. With the Internet technology to support the team, Terry engaged in collaboration and team-working in spite of the distance. Terry in turn gains all the benefits from being 'part of the team'."

This section seeks to develop a different interpretation of Terry's situation. It focuses on the social dynamics I observed as Terry attempted to construct a legitimate identity in the eyes of his team-mates.

The obligation to show you possess relevant 'expertise' may have been felt most acutely by Terry by virtue of his geographical location. As one team member told me about Terry: "*How can I put it? Terry's in Scotland so I do most of the client visits, 'cause most of the clients are down here*". This suggests that Terry's identity as a valuable contributor to the team is most precarious. Terry's location means his client list may be less prominent than others. His team-mates do indeed put substantial effort into keeping him feeling like 'part of the team' by phoning him often (see section 4.3.5), but this is not purely for social and humanistic reasons. Terry was expected, as was every team member including the researcher, to demonstrate the value he adds to the team.

Terry actually seemed to be held in high regard by his team-mates. This appeared to be in part due to a particular 'skill' he is thought to possess. Terry is recognised by himself and his team-mates to possess, among other things, the rare skill of being an excellent 'proof reader'. This skill is deemed invaluable in editing consultancy documents before they are sent to clients. Moreover, this skill is seen as perfectly suited to being performed at a distance from his location in Scotland. Team members send Terry documents by email that he edits from his home office and emails back. The construction of this 'skill' – maintained both by himself and the actions of his team-mates – seems to enable Terry to maintain a legitimate identity within the team.

This dynamic is evident in the interview extracts of Terry when he talks about his relationship with his team-mate Barry:

"I do a lot of proof reading for other people in the team, a lot of translating documents into English. Full-stops are an alien world to Barry for example! I quite like doing that 'cause I've got an eye for it and also I can do it from Scotland quite easily, so I don't feel- I won't see as many customers as Barry or Nigel 'cause I've got longer times to travel. But one of the good things about the team is that we work on a communal target basis. ... Proof reading is easy to do for me and it's easy to do from where I do it. So I put my hand up for that, ... everybody plays to their strengths."

Terry is clearly aware that his location may mean seeing fewer clients. This may bring with it an awareness that Terry could be viewed by his team-mates as failing to contribute adequately to the team. He is therefore keen to demonstrate his contribution to the team through this skill he claims to possess which (fortunately) can be conducted from Scotland. This skill is indeed attributed value by his team-mates who recognise and appreciate his contribution. Barry in particular describes how he appreciates Terry's proof-reading skill. Barry also

views his actions as altruistic because they ‘involve him [Terry] in the team’, but finally assesses the situation as a good trade-off: ‘quid pro quo’.

“Terry - an absolutely brilliant proof reader. Which sounds a really mundane thing, but if you write a document and bung loads of ideas down very quickly, sometimes you need someone to step back and say ‘actually, that paragraph doesn’t make any sense’. And consequently you’ve gotta clarify it. That’s a skill he’s got and he does it very quickly, whereas it’d take me ages to do. Immediately he knows he’s gonna get pinged [emailed], ‘cause his location is quite good for that - it involves him in the team, in what everyone else is doing. ‘Cause he’s in Scotland, it brings him back in to not feeling like he’s in Scotland. He’s giving me a skill but I’m giving him information. Quid pro quo.”

This dynamic interplay between Terry’s ‘skill’ and the actions of his team-mates does not appear to be the result of the technology of email in ‘bridging the distance’, or the target system per se. Email may lose its ‘intrinsic value’ in the absence of the conscious effort made by Terry’s team-mates to include him in activities, and without the work Terry puts into contributing to the team from his location. If the ‘essential capacities’ of the technology and the ‘instrumental-rationality’ of the target system do not help us to understand Terry’s relationship with FlexiTeam, what instead can help us account for the dynamic described above?

One way of accounting for the dynamic is to explore the relationship between what team members do – in the case collaborate with Terry to include him in the team – and who they *are*; their subjectivity. It has already been argued that team members are accountable to their clients. Martin described how he uses the case of Terry to persuade clients that virtual teamwork does not impede teamwork (see section 5.2.1). Yet team members also appear to be accountable to their team-mates. They are accountable for ‘adding value’ and bringing ‘expertise’ to the

team. This could be seen as informing Terry's pre-occupation with the need to demonstrate the value to the team of his 'proof-reading skill'. 'Being a team' is interesting for its social consequences - the forms of behaviour it anticipates on the part of team members. The importance and outcomes of 'being a team player' is explored further in the next section.

5. Being a 'Team Player'

FlexiTeam's identification with 'being a team' - as opposed to a group of individuals - brings with it expectations regarding team members' behaviour. Explicit references were often made to the expectation that members should act as a 'team player' rather than 'individualistically'. Public references to teamwork often took a positive, approving form. For example, when Eric returned from his holiday he praised the team at the next team meeting with explicit reference to their teamwork behaviour: "*Thanks for all the hard work while I was away, and all the teamworking that went on*". Indeed, one aspect of the audio-conferences and team meetings I observed was the excellent teamwork that appeared to be practised in FlexiTeam. Members would often ask for help, to which their team-mates would invariably offer their assistance. Members would then duly give thanks to their team-mates for helping them out.

References to teamwork sometimes also took a negative, sanction form. For example, Eric himself came under criticism from Georgina at the same team meeting described above for failing to share information and include the team in his decisions. At two separate points in the meeting Georgina made a sarcastic and joking 'dig' at Eric by saying "*would you like to share that with us before you send it off to the developers?*", and "*would you like to share with us what that strategy is?*".

This example of peer pressure can help to reinterpret the effort put into the knowledge sharing practices described in section 4.3.1. Their self-disciplined work towards sustaining 'knowledge sharing' is inadequately understood through reference to the inherent informational capacities of the technology they use, or the effects of the target system in place. In fact, as described earlier, Barry recognised earlier that knowledge sharing occurred quite effectively without the existence of a target that measured and rewarded such practice (5.4.3).

It appears from the data presented in this section that FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse - including the emphasis on teamwork, trust, and knowledge sharing – constitutes a pressure upon team members to maintain an identity as a 'trustworthy, valuable and expert' team member. The researcher also felt this pressure to sustain a legitimate identity during her fieldwork. The discourse seemed to operate through the mechanisms of peer expectations and surveillance. This 'normative control' may work to mitigate the problem of 'free loaders', ensuring that everyone 'goes the extra mile' for the team. In other words, it seemed that self-discipline was achieved through the normalisation of team members' subjectivity in line the standard of what constitutes a 'good virtual team member'. This aspect of their consultancy discourse was not only an abstract discourse sold to clients. Team members appeared to experience a more intimate relationship with the discourse because they felt personally accountable for aligning their identity with the discourse they sell.

However, in the absence of objective measures, the issue of how peers evaluate the 'trustworthiness, competence and value' of a team members' contribution remains fundamentally problematic. Team members appear to be subject to an

imperative to continually *perform* their identity in order to construct a legitimate position in the team. Coupled with the anxiety often expressed by dispersed workers regarding their isolation in the organisation, *visibility* appears an important concept in understanding the social consequences of being a member of FlexiTeam.

6. *The Individualising Consequences of 'Visibility'*

In spite of the *collective* images associated with teamwork – social support, community, family – the pressure to maintain visibility, gain the respect of your team-mates and construct an identity as a 'valued team player' may actually be seen to constitute an *individualised* responsibility. The onus is placed on the individual to make their contribution and competencies visible to others. As Barry stated

"It means you have to work at it, think about visibility; am I visible?"

Terry explained how the pressure to justify your legitimacy as a team member leads to constant maintenance activity of his relationships within the team. He works hard to perform actions such as 'getting back to someone' and 'helping them out' in order to demonstrate that he is 'going the extra mile' for the team.

"Within the team, you must show the willingness to muck in-: pick up at least what you think is your fair share, get back to someone if they've got an issue, try and help them out. ... It's quite critical that you're seen to muck in and do what you can, where your skills lie."

It is indeed '*quite critical*' that Terry is seen to '*muck in*' because, as discussed above, his location in Scotland means he is perceived as being away from the majority of clients. This appears to lead to team members like Terry monitoring

both others *and themselves* to evaluate whether they are doing their 'fair share' of the work. Intra-team surveillance thus appears to work to make team members *self-discipline* their behaviour.

In addition to working to help their team-mates, FlexiTeam members strive hard to promote themselves and their 'successes' to sustain their reputation as a competent, hard-working and valued team member. For example, I asked Darren in our interview how he demonstrates the value of the work he does. He explained that aside from the projects where he bills the client and there is 'real revenue' involved, for more subtle occasions he feels it is necessary for team members to '*blow their own trumpet*'.

"Occasionally it's, like this week, when you do a presentation and you get good feedback from that and it sounds positive, then you might make a phone call out. ... Things like that, that might go unnoticed otherwise. There needs to be a little bit of blowing your own trumpet when you work the way we do. [in silly voice] 'Share your successes!'. [Interviewer laughs] Not the failures, keep quiet about them!"

To be sure, part of the consultancy advice offered by FlexiTeam during the "Managing Dispersed Teams" workshop I attended included the importance of virtual team members making themselves visible and engaging in self-publicity. The workshop participants were advised to identify influential people and make a good impression with them, for example by forwarding emails about new business or praise from existing clients. Similarly, for the piece I wrote for Georgina on 'tips on managing your career' described earlier (section 5.4.1), she advised me to include that teleworkers should make themselves visible to avoid being 'out of sight and out of mind' regarding reward and recognition.

I can therefore reflexively assess my own role in contributing to the individualisation associated with virtual teamwork. I was well aware of what was needed in this 'managerialist' piece, having read the practitioner literature (2.1) and studied FlexiTeam for a time, and was soon able to produce a list of 'tips' (see Appendix 3). The 'tips' basically recommend that teleworkers take responsibility for their own career. By writing this piece, which is now on the FlexiTeam website and published in 'Teleworker' journal (Whittle, 2001), I am myself part of furthering the 'individualisation' of responsibility for making teleworking 'work'.

This responsibility to 'promote yourself' appears to be a hidden workload that FlexiTeam assume to be necessary for effective virtual teamwork. For those competent at *being seen* to be a team player and skilled in networking and impression management, this 'self-publicity' workload may easily be taken-for-granted. However, for those such as Carol who perceives herself as less successful at self-promotion, this pressure appears to generate less positive feelings about virtual teamwork.

Carol was widely accorded the lowest status of all team members, in spite of recent attempts to 're-grade' her role to reflect her responsibilities²⁵. Carol was acutely aware of this status imbalance. She compared her position in FlexiTeam with her experiences with the managers from other companies on her college course, which she attends once a week. She told me during a shadowing visit one day:

"I feel like I know my place in the team. People ring me up and say 'will you do this?' – you know menial tasks. ... I already do the job of a

manager but I'm not recognised or paid for it. ... I mean at college they are all senior managers but they treat me as 'one of them'."

Carol therefore doubted the notion that performance targets make virtual teamwork a fair and meritocratic system. She expressed dissatisfaction with the imbalance between the level of skill she feels she demonstrates and the lack of reward and recognition she receives. She partially attributed this discrepancy to virtual teamwork:

"In a virtual team people cannot see how much you have developed and learnt"

However, the theme of most of her narratives was not the problems of virtual teamwork, but the problems she sees within *herself*. Her failings were not ultimately attributed to virtual teamwork, but instead to her own personal failing to 'promote herself'. Carol reiterated to me throughout my fieldwork that she felt she did not promote herself enough. She felt that she does a lot of 'behind the scenes' work but does not tell others about it; something other team members tend to be good at. A good example of how this 'behind the scenes' workload can be made visible was performed by Georgina at a team meeting. In response to Nigel's comment that consultancy workshops constitute a single day's work, Georgina reminded her colleagues:

"It's not doing the workshop that's the big thing. It's preparing the stuff, it's doing the output, doing the analysis from the questionnaires, the report. The backroom stuff."

²⁵ Carol has more recently passed her re-grading assessment to become the same grade band as the rest of the team.

Carol therefore decided that the solution to her low status in the team was to 'work harder' at 'promoting herself'. This reasoning also led Carol to attribute her lack of progress within the team to her own failure at maintaining visibility.

"I don't promote myself enough. ... I've got to be more outward and sell myself more, that's something I've really got to work on. ... I know I can do things quite often. I know inside I can do it, but you know, I don't know why I don't sell myself. You know, I should really."

This 'visibility' discourse appeared to be internalised by Carol as she interpreted her dissatisfaction to be the result of her own inadequacy. In this sense, the discourse of self-determination - 'you are what you make of yourself' – refers her back to herself and individualises the responsibility for her social situation. The solution was not to question and change FlexiTeam's current processes of recognition and reward, or to question the more fundamental ethics and efficacy of virtual teamwork, but instead to work harder at promoting herself.

Summary

In summary, this section began by questioning and critiquing FlexiTeam's 'emic' theory of how disciplined, team-oriented behaviour is secured from virtual team members. The assumptions of economic-rationality underlying the target system were questioned around four lines of critique: the work activities not included in the target system, problems of definition and measurement, their ethics and efficacy and theory of motivation. In search of an alternative 'etic' understanding of the disciplined team-working behaviour observed in FlexiTeam, the role of team members' subjectivity in the context of normative discourses and peer surveillance was examined. Team members appeared to be accountable not only to their clients and TechnoCo, but also to their team-mates. The pressure for FlexiTeam members to maintain a legitimate identity with their team-mates as a

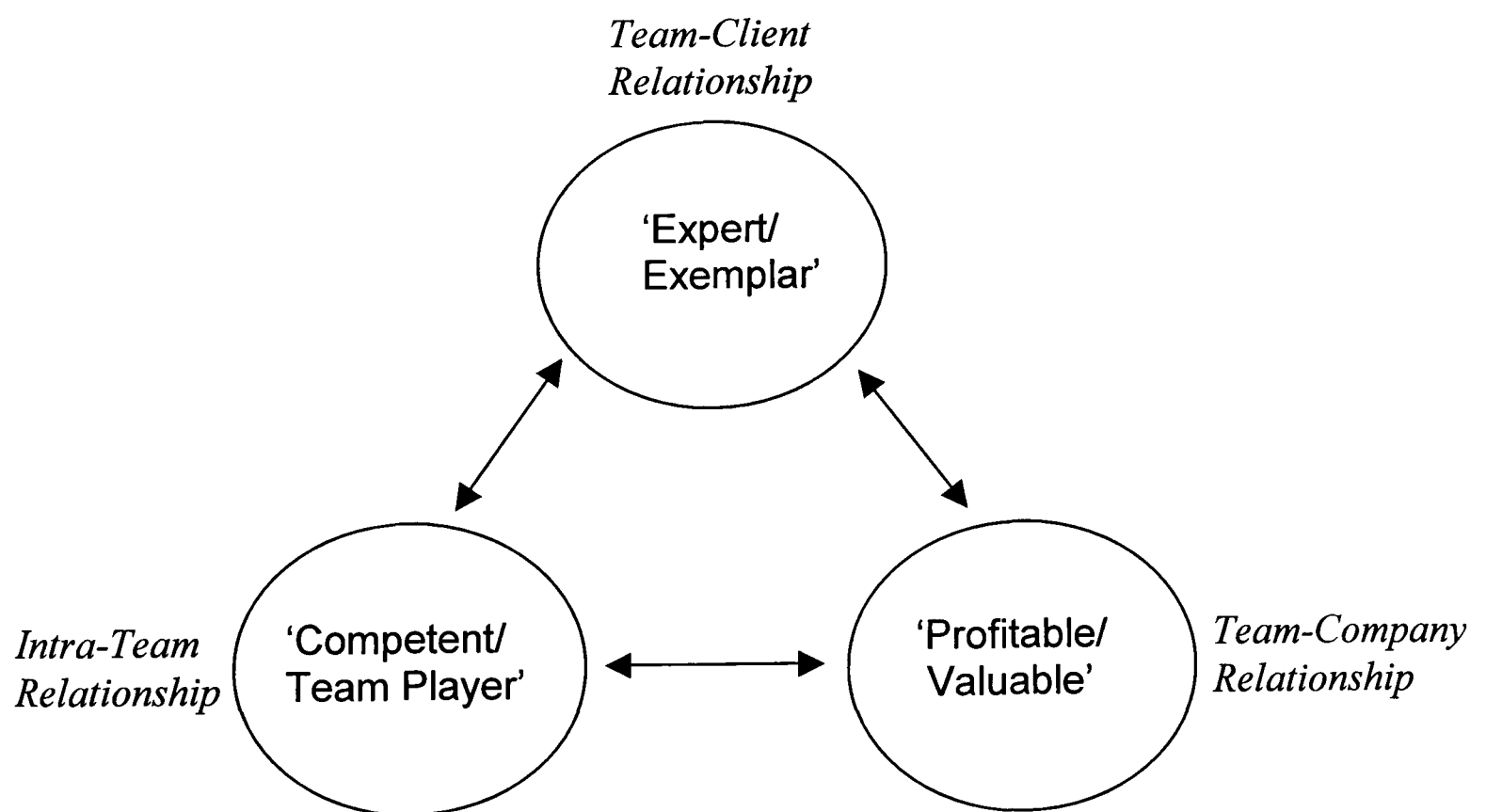
competent and hard working ‘team player’ appeared to work to construct self-disciplined behaviour. Furthermore, it was suggested that this ‘identity work’ constitutes a form *individualisation*, whereby team members take individual responsibility and for their visibility and recognition in the team.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has developed an understanding of the work and discipline described in Chapter 4 through an analysis of the subjectivity of FlexiTeam members as constructed in the context of their local social relationships. It was argued that what team members *do* – as described in Chapter 4 – can be understood through an analysis of who they *are* – their identity. This analysis has questioned the theory implicit in FlexiTeam’s consultancy discourse, and within the practitioner literature (2.1), which suggests that ‘success’ in virtual teams is secured by simply implementing ‘best practice’ management processes along with the support of the latest ICTs.

FlexiTeam are accountable to many different social relationships at work. The chapter examined fieldwork data pertaining to three particular social relationships that appeared to be significant in shaping team members’ subjectivity. It is not suggested that this description is exhaustive and complete – there are surely many other social relationships that are important to team members’ identity, such as relations with family and friends, previous working relationships with colleagues within the organisation and so on. However, on the basis of a thorough analysis of the data, these three social relationships emerged as significant because they consumed much of the discussions and debates within FlexiTeam observed during my fieldwork.

Nor is it suggested that the three social relationships identified are mutually exclusive. The three relationships are interrelated and often mutually reinforcing²⁶. What is beneficial for the client relationship often also facilitates FlexiTeam’s profile and legitimacy in TechnoCo, as well as bolstering the perception of the team member’s competence and worth in the team. For example, landing a big consultancy contract with a major client helps to promote the profile and justify the position of FlexiTeam within TechnoCo, as well as aiding the team members’ reputation within the team. By definition, losing a bid for consultancy work may damage FlexiTeam’s legitimacy within TechnoCo and call into question the team member’s position in the team. In terms of the subject positions FlexiTeam aspire to in the context of these three relationships, the interrelationships may be depicted as follows:



²⁶ An example of how these forms of accountability generate contradictory pressures, as opposed to reinforcing each other, is examined later in section 6.2.

Thus, in conclusion, team members' social relationship between clients, TechnoCo and within the team could be said to have a possible normalising effect on their subjectivity. The work and self-disciplined behaviour described in the previous chapter can be understood in the context of team members' desire to sustain an identity as an 'exemplary, profitable, team player'. Performed successfully, this identity is alluring in its potential to secure for the team member both the respect and recognition of team-mates, high status and remuneration within the organisation, and a successful sales 'pitch' to win consultancy business from clients. The attraction of this identity helps us to understand its potential for normalising team members' subjectivity.

The word 'potential' has been deliberately used to signal the caution with which the researcher proceeds to ascribe 'totalising' power to the discourses to which FlexiTeam members are subject. This chapter has presented data that could be seen to suggest that the discourses to which team members were subject were omnipotent and complete in their colonisation of their subjectivity. However, the researcher also gathered data that calls into question this argument. This data, and its implications for the theorisation of subjectivity, is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 6. Normalised Subjectivity?

Introduction

The previous chapter examined the processes of normative control constructed through FlexiTeam's social relationships with their clients, their employing organisation and within the team. It was argued that the construction of a normalised 'exemplary, profitable, team player' identity offers an alternative understanding of the labour and discipline described in Chapter 4. This goes beyond the assumption that FlexiTeam merely implement 'best practice', to address the social mechanisms through which consent and commitment to the required changes might be achieved.

However, the final section (5.4) included narratives that expressed a level of cynicism with regard to virtual teamwork. Carol expressed her dissatisfaction with some aspects of her role in the team that she attributed in part to virtual teamwork. This questions the notion that the normalisation of team members' subjectivity can be regarded as 'total'. This somewhat deterministic argument assumes that discourse represents a consistent and homogenous power that acts upon passive recipients. In other words, this thesis has yet to address the third and final research question:

3. Can the colonisation of team members' subjectivity be considered 'total'?

A critique of the 'totalising' argument requires an examination of fieldwork data regarding the forms of subjectivity encountered that do not neatly fit into an

identification/internalisation framework. This is the project taken up by this chapter. The chapter begins by examining attempts at 'voice' against the teleworking consultancy discourse (6.1). The chapter describes how some team members expressed a sense of disillusionment, disregard and cynicism in relation to the discourse. It is argued that these attempts at 'voice' still display an individualised response that works within the dominant discourse, and thereby fall short of what could sensibly be called 'resistance'.

The chapter moves on to describe the various degrees of identification and compliance implied by team members' actions and interactions (6.2). By analysing an example where FlexiTeam actively *contradicted* their very own consultancy discourse, it is hoped that this will bring further sophistication to the theory of subjectivity developed in this thesis. It is argued that these subjective responses are a result of the inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions between the discourse of teleworking consultancy and the many other discourses that team members' are subject to in their working lives. The (carefully managed) act of contradiction can therefore be seen as a way of managing the multiple forms of accountability experienced by team members during their working lives.

Finally, the temporal frame of the research is extended to place the discussion in the wider context of team members' careers (6.3). Career narratives appeared to enable team members to make sense of their everyday performances of identification with the teleworking consultancy discourse in terms of their longer-term 'project of the self'. The term 'instrumental commitment' is employed to describe this dynamic.

6.1 Forms of 'Voice' and 'Resistance'?

The literature review (section 2.7) established that a consideration of resistance is important for developing a more sophisticated understanding of subjectivity at work that goes beyond 'discourse determinism'. Thus, in order to refute the notion that FlexiTeam's teleworking consultancy discourse determined the subjectivity of team members in an omnipotent and 'totalising' manner, it is important to analyse my data for empirical examples of resistance. This is important for reminding the reader that power does not act upon passive recipients or 'cultural dopes' and is therefore always subject to various degrees of internalisation. Team members are active subjects who have the capacity to interpret and question the discourses to which they are subject.

I did indeed collect data that suggested a divergence from the 'totalising' thesis criticised above. However, the term 'resistance', as discussed in the literature review, appeared to be inappropriate for categorising this data. Resistance implies a conscious recognition of and opposition to the oppressive power effects of discursive control. During my fieldwork I observed few instances of resistance in this sense of the term. The term 'resistance' also assumes a 'locus of control' somewhere 'outside' the group in question, usually placed in the hands of senior management. Power is thus seen as a possession of a particular group, with resistance being something that is outside of and in opposition to the exercise of power. This conceptualisation of power was subject to critique in section 2.7.

Indeed, this conceptualisation did not seem useful for understanding the case of FlexiTeam. The teleworking consultancy discourse was not generated by a group 'outside' the team but was generated from 'within'. The team members

themselves generated the consultancy discourse over time through their experiences with 'Work-anywhere' and their interactions with clients. In fact, the phrase 'colonisation', as used so far in this thesis, may be inappropriate for describing the relationship between the discourse and team members' subjectivity. This metaphor implies a group who seek to 'colonise' and 'impose control'. In the case of FlexiTeam, there is no such locus of control, and the discourse is not only consumed but also produced by FlexiTeam.

The teleworking consultancy discourse did not seem to work *on* or *over* the team members, who can therefore attempt to 'resist' the exercise of power. Rather, the discourse appeared to operate *through* team members at the level of their subjectivity. Team members therefore did not stand outside of the exercise of power. The forms of subjectivity in FlexiTeam cannot therefore be categorised neatly into either 'identification' with the discourse or 'resistance' to the discourse. By suggesting that the power of the consultancy discourse operates through team members' subjectivity, this does not mean that this operation is simple, straightforward and predictable.

The challenge for this thesis is therefore to explore variation in discursive constitution. This section responds to this challenge by examining data that did not appear to fit neatly into the category 'identification' or the category 'resistance'. Alternative concepts, such as disillusionment, dissatisfaction, disregard, cynicism, contradiction and instrumental commitment are developed during the discussion to help to categorise the empirical examples given.

Although most team members expressed their satisfaction with virtual teamwork, in line with the team's role in selling the concept, two team members did express

to the researcher on several occasions their dissatisfaction, discontent and disillusionment with virtual teamwork. (These team members shall be called Member1 and Member2 and references to gender removed to respect their confidentiality²⁷.) This suggests that the pressure to demonstrate an 'exemplary' identity was not totalising in its effects. Complaints surfaced even in a team who promote virtual teamwork. These complaints reminded me that, although team members are obviously discouraged from expressing negative opinions about virtual teamwork due to their role in the sale and promotion of this way of working, this did not necessarily determine their subjectivity.

During the course of my fieldwork Member1 told me about the many aspects of virtual teamwork that were not seen as beneficial. Member1 told me that flexible working can affect the rest of your life, such as the long hours travelling and overnight stay's required to attend team meetings. Member 1 told me that "*the work can 'take over' your life because you are expected to do 'all sorts' to keep the team going*". Team meetings are so infrequent that there is too much to be 'crammed in' to one day, so it is "*hard to get a word in edgeways*". Furthermore, Member1 did not feel relaxed at meetings because the rest of the team are practically strangers - they have few opportunities to meet up because they are a dispersed team. Most of all, Member1 stressed the feeling of social isolation that results from virtual teamwork.

In conversation with Member2, a similar narrative of dissatisfaction with virtual teamwork was constructed. Member2 told me that team members "*'clam up' at team meetings because we hardly know each other*". Member2 also stressed the disadvantages of social isolation resulting from virtual teamwork, by exclaiming

²⁷ Writing without reference to gender was, in reflection, a difficult task. Apologies are made for the

“you could be dead for two weeks and your boss would not even know!”

Member2 reasoned that a solution could be to have more social meetings with the team, perhaps at a pub after work. This is an aspect of virtual teamwork Member2 misses from working in an office.

These narratives run contrary to the picture of virtual teamwork sold by FlexiTeam, where virtual teams remain cohesive by communicating using ICTs, build relationships through regular face-to-face contact and enjoy an improved work-life balance (see ‘Scenario’, section 4.2). These narratives are a far cry from the sales pitch used by the team with clients, whereby virtual teamwork is presented as a win-win solution for both employer and employee. In this sales pitch, any such ‘problems’ are labelled ‘challenges’ and clients are told they can be overcome through the implementation of ‘best practice’ management processes, such as team meetings, audio-conferences and regular one-to-one communication (see Chapter 4).

The existence of these dissatisfied narratives questions the notion that team members simply identified with and internalised the teleworking consultancy discourse. If team members were completely identified with the discourse, these complaints would not be expected to occur. Voicing dissatisfaction about virtual teamwork does not rest easily with their role as teleworking consultants. Member1 and Member2 were aware of how their complaints stood in relation to the team’s identity with clients as ‘exemplars’ of ‘best practice’. Member1 accused the team of ‘hypocrisy’ by claiming *“they don’t practice what they preach”*. This seemed to leave Member1 with a sense of *cynicism* regarding the team’s relationship to their consultancy discourse.

Nevertheless, these 'complaints' must be placed in context and interpreted as a highly situated narrative. These complaints were expressed in private to an 'independent' outside researcher. I must therefore be reflexive about how my social relationship with the participants shaped the data I collected. Participants may well offer particular narratives to me that they might not express within the team. Indeed, team members may have a personal agenda for their conversations with the researcher. For example, Member1 suggested that the issue of social isolation could be "*something you might 'feed back' from your research*".

It is therefore insightful to retell the story I was told about when Member1 *did* try to express this sense of dissatisfaction and social isolation during a team meeting. Member1 summed up the response by the team as 'being shot down in flames'²⁸. In the context of a team who promote and sell virtual teamwork, there may indeed be little room for 'voice' regarding any problematic or negative aspects of the arrangement. The irony here is that, although the team experience a form of reflexivity in their relationship to clients towards be 'exemplars', this reflexivity appeared to inhibit their ability to be reflexive in the sense of reflecting on and improving their own practices as a team. This appeared to leave Member1 with a sense of *disillusionment* about the team's commitment to implementing the consultancy discourse they preach to clients.

To be sure, as a researcher conducting fieldwork with the team, I was also acting within this context. I would compare my attempts to be part of the 'culture' of FlexiTeam to the 'culture' I felt already a part of within academia. There were

²⁸ This incident was before my fieldwork started so I was therefore unable to observe this occasion.

many aspects of studying FlexiTeam that I found difficult and generated a lot of anxiety. I sympathised with Member1 regarding the amount of travelling required by virtual teamwork, when the location of the team meeting was changed every month for example. I felt that the 'luxury' of collecting some data from my own office was 'hard won' by the extensive travelling I undertook to meet team members face-to-face.

I soon learnt a lesson from the team leader Martin about who is expected to take responsibility for this workload. After I explained that I had stayed over night with a friend nearby before the team meeting, because getting from West London to Leicester for 9am on public transport was not 'do-able', Martin sternly replied "*nothing is not do-able*". In the absence of the travel and subsistence account and company cars enjoyed by FlexiTeam, which is incidentally one of the largest of their department, I found this pressure hard to reconcile. Waking at 5am to travel 4 hours to a meeting was such a taken-for-granted expectation within the team that it was not acceptable to speak about or problematise this aspect of virtual teamwork. As Kevin explained in section 4.3.7, travelling is seen as just "*part of the job whether you like it or not*". I seemed to experience a similar 'silencing' response to my comment about travelling as Member1 experienced to the comment about social isolation (discussed above).

In retrospect, my experience helped me to understand the potentially 'individualising' effects of FlexiTeam's discourse. Members' experiences appear to be 'pushed back on themselves' as they learn to find solutions *within themselves* to the problems they face. Indeed, on the basis of my fieldwork experiences I did not observe team members explicitly questioning the ethics and efficacy of promoting virtual teamwork. Even the public complaint about social

isolation at a team meeting expressed by Member1, as described above, was not framed to suggest that virtual teamwork was inherently flawed. Member1 framed the narrative in terms of wanting to point out the problem of social isolation in order to improve their current processes. The aim, I was told, was to improve and perfect their 'best practice' processes. Member1 worked within their teleworking consultancy discourse whereby virtual teamwork is an inherently good but also inherently problematic phenomenon (see section 4.1.3). Member1's complaint was therefore in fitting with the team's identity as 'experts' and 'exemplars'; constantly striving to improve their 'best practice' processes in order to demonstrate to clients that they can overcome the 'problem' of social isolation.

Discontent also failed to manifest itself as resistance in the case of Member2. In our interview, Member2 described the strength of the dissatisfaction with virtual teamwork, also in terms of 'social isolation' and missing the 'teamwork' of working in an office:

"I really really miss the social aspect of working in an office. I'm still friends with people I used to work with. I like the banter, the talking... enjoying yourself and having a laugh. And going out for the odd drink on a Friday night, before you go home. Puts you in a good mood and you think "yeah, it's worth it". ... And sometimes that sense of teamwork isn't as strong as being in an office. Cos [in an office] I can just rock up to someone and say "I've got this idea..., can you just spend five minutes and we'll get a cup of coffee and discuss it?", as opposed to "Why don't you come into the office, come and discuss it, or can we do it over the phone?". Is that the most ideal situation? Sometimes it isn't y'know. ... I found [joining the team] very tough actually. It's very different from how I normally work. It's not that I need people around me ... all the time, it's just you need a little bit of that. You still need a little bit of contact. Sometimes I go weeks without seeing anyone or I have done. At one point it was two months, where they cancelled the team meeting, when I thought that maybe this isn't for me? And that's not the case with a lot of jobs, in other parts of the business people work virtually but they still make the effort to have- Like I know my friends, they work from home, but they see their team a hell of a lot more

at some points than I do. I went on a course once and met a sales team - they had very good rapport with each other, they were like mates. They were gonna go away from each other, but they still had that kinship."

In the context of an interview with an outside researcher, Member2 was able to offer a narrative that vastly differs from those performed for the client, extolling the virtues of teleworking. Yet the interesting aspect of Member2's reasoning is that it did not lead to the conclusion that there was anything inherently problematic with virtual teamwork. Member2 simply argued that it not 'suitable' at the moment, although it is enjoyed and appreciated by other team members:

"I don't have a suitable environment for it [working from home]. ... The other people on the team like working with their families, and that's convenient for them ... I mean, they [other team members] like what they're doing, they joined because of the way they get to work."

Member2 accounted for dissatisfaction with virtual teamwork in terms of differences in individual circumstances. Therefore, without actively disputing the merits of working from home *per se*, Member2 developed an *individual* and somewhat *ironic* solution. This teleworking consultant regularly commutes to an office!

This "individual circumstances" logic did not therefore contradict Member2's role in FlexiTeam involving the promotion and sale of virtual teamwork. Indeed, Member2 continued in our interview to describe with great enthusiasm the role of selling teleworking to clients:

"Chasing new business, trying to drum up things. [Pause] I've been kinda successful at that and it's been something I've really enjoyed... It's not easy, very difficult in fact, very challenging. ... It's about changing perception and saying [to the client] "You've got the hot buttons there, so why don't you develop a flexible working strategy?" Get people talking

about it. Changing their minds. I think I've maybe converted maybe one or two [clients], I've had maybe ten opportunities."

It was not until I subsequently analysed the data that I noticed the ambivalence inherent in Member2's narrative. Member2 criticised teleworking heavily then later in the interview described with passion selling the concept to potential clients. In our interview, Member2 seems to have been able to maintain the ambiguous and ambivalent position of being a teleworking consultant while deciding personally not to practice teleworking by appealing to 'individual circumstances' and the importance of 'choice'. To be sure, FlexiTeam advise clients *against* implementing teleworking as a compulsory change to allow for those whose circumstances are make teleworking "not right" for them. As Georgina explained about virtual teamwork in our interview:

"It's not right for everybody though. If it works well it works really well. This group - everybody has chosen to be doing what we're doing, by and large - and it does work well."

Therefore, if teleworking is seen as a "choice" rather than a compulsory change, Member2's somewhat ironic rejection of teleworking in favour of commuting to an office does not seem as antithetical to FlexiTeam's teleworking evangelism role as it first appeared.

The data I collected about team member Nigel also appeared to be somewhat ironic and antithetical to the team's role as a teleworking consultancy. Nigel was well known for actively *disregarding* many of the 'best practice' processes advocated by FlexiTeam (see Chapter 4). Nigel described himself to me, and was also described by his team-mates, as a "maverick". Nigel was renowned for disliking the formality of any set of formal processes, such as updating your voicemail daily and recording the review meetings. I noticed this during a

business development meeting - while Barry was religiously phoning his voicemail to update his message, Nigel exclaimed that he "*can't be arsed*" to update his voicemail every day.

This appeared to be an act of public defiance that demonstrates Nigel's disassociation with the 'normalised' subjectivity displayed by his colleagues. It could also lead the researcher to conclude that, as a result of this act of 'disrespect', Nigel's reputation within the team might be damaged. Indeed, other TechnoCo employees who fail to act 'properly', for example by failing to reply to emails and voicemails, are often regarded with great contempt and derision. For example, I observed a meeting in which both Carol and Eric berated a colleague for being hard to contact. Terry even resorted to putting a 'trace' upon a colleague who was not replying to his emails, who then suddenly started replying first time! Resisting the imperative to maintain 'contactability' (see section 4.3.3), which FlexiTeam see as important for making virtual teamwork function, had clear social consequences in these cases. The consequences might be expected to be all the more severe in the case of a transgression of norms by a FlexiTeam member.

It would be expected, therefore, that Nigel would be unpopular within the team for failing to perform the 'exemplar' identity described in Chapter 5 (section 5.2). The irony was that, in spite of this failure to maintain an 'exemplar' identity, Nigel was held in high regard by the team. The conversations I witnessed involved praise of his creative ability, flair and interpersonal skills when selling to clients. This 'skill' was understood to help the team win consultancy business, making Nigel valued for the unique skill contribution or 'expertise' he brings to the team, as described in the previous chapter (5.4). In terms of the 'colours', or forms of expertise,

allocated to team members by the personality questionnaire they completed (see section 5.4.4), Georgina explains why Nigel is valued in the team:

“Me and Nigel would do very different things in the team. He goes out and wows them [clients], and gets them hungry. I’m at the other end saying ‘this is what we promised so this is how we do it’. The blue and yellow thing²⁹, we’re opposite. So it works.”

An identity as a ‘maverick’ may indeed involve an impatience with many of the ‘best practice’ processes, but this impatience appeared to be tolerated so long as Nigel demonstrated his value and worth to the overall ‘success’ of the team. After all, Nigel was a ‘business developer’ responsible for “wow-ing” potential clients, not a ‘consultant’ like Georgina who then educates the clients about ‘best practice’ teleworking. ‘Success’ appeared to be primarily defined in terms of generating consultancy sales, in service of maintaining the legitimacy of the team’s position within TechnoCo (see section 5.3). Nigel’s failure to display the ‘exemplar’ identity implicated in the team-client relationship seemed to be tolerated so long he was seen as befitting the identity implicated in the Team-TechnoCo and Intra-Team relationship, by winning client business and demonstrating his unique ‘expertise’ in so doing (see sections 5.3 and 5.4 respectively). In other words, with respect to performing an ‘exemplary, profitable, team player’ identity, it seemed that performing two out of the three was tolerated³⁰.

Besides, although Nigel displays a disregard for certain details of the discourse in some of his private ‘backstage’ interactions with the team, his identity performances in front of clients remained consistent with being a teleworking

²⁹ This reference to ‘yellow’ refers to one of the four colours generated by the personality questionnaire completed by the team at a team meeting (see section 5.4.4).

³⁰ An alternative interpretation of this data is offered in the Conclusion (section 7.2.3).

evangelist. As he recounted in our interview, Nigel employs a persuasive narrative with clients about his personal 'conversion' to working in new ways using technology. Like he tells clients, he told me in our interview that before he joined FlexiTeam he had never even used a PC. Now he enthusiastically promotes to clients the benefits of technology-enabled change!

In summary, examples of dissatisfaction, discontent, disillusionment and disregard have been described that seem to reveal, on the part of certain team members, subjective distancing, questioning, criticism and cynicism regarding the teleworking consultancy discourse. However, it was also questioned whether these instances could sensibly be labelled 'resistance'. In spite of their more critical reflection on the discourse, team members still seemed to follow a way of thinking that did not question the ultimate validity and virtue of the teleworking consultancy discourse. A pattern of 'individualisation' was observed whereby team members avoided questioning the inherent ethics and efficacy of virtual teamwork in favour of individual solutions to their dissatisfaction. This highlights the *ambiguity* and *complexity* of these team members' relationship to the teleworking consultancy discourse.

This section has thereby drawn attention to an important correction to the notion that FlexiTeam members' subjectivity is normalised in a total fashion by their teleworking consultancy discourse. This argument is furthered in the next section by exploring how team members manage the multiple and often competing discourses to which they are subject.

6.2 Managing Multiple Accountability

The previous section presented several examples of deviation from the normalised subjectivity expected from a total internalisation of the teleworking consultancy discourse. This finding is particularly surprising from a team whose job is 'teleworking consultancy'. It was suggested, however, that these forms of deviation did not appear to constitute any sustained and/or collective forms of resistance to the discourse.

Nevertheless, even given identification with the discourse, this does not imply that the discourse can be straightforwardly translated into a guide for action. This assumes a discourse that is both transparent and consistent, akin to a rulebook that members simply read, understand and apply. Even given consent and commitment, a discourse must necessarily be made sense of within the local situations in which it is enacted. In short, discourses can be seen as *interpretively flexible*. Many interpretations are possible, especially in the light of the many other discourses to which employees are subject, both inside and outside organisations. Cultural changes - like bureaucratic rules - do not deterministically generate social action. Decisions must be actively 'worked up' through the interaction of participants who use the discourse as a guide for action. FlexiTeam's situation is unlike most cases where management attempt to secure compliance to a change imposed upon the workforce in a 'top-down' fashion. Yet even for a team that generated their own discourse, adhering to the discourse was on occasions far from straightforward.

Discourses themselves are not always *homogenous* and *consistent*. In the consultancy discourse promoted by FlexiTeam, and indeed the practitioner

literature (see section 2.1), it is largely assumed that the discourse is internally consistent and complete. For example, FlexiTeam promote teleworking as generating a multiplicity of benefits that are assumed to be mutually consistent and compatible (see section 1.1.3). Yet sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3 explored how two of these so-called ‘benefits’ of teleworking – being ‘closer to the customer’ and ‘work-life balance’ – may act in *conflict* with each other. For example, a family crisis and a client deadline may constitute *conflicting* demands as to which to prioritise.

It appeared that the hierarchy of values created by FlexiTeam attributed a greater priority to being ‘closer to the customer’ than ‘work-life balance’. We have seen how Carol’s call to the vet operating on her cat was deemed ‘inappropriate’, while Darren’s story of helping a client over the phone while at an exhibition stand was celebrated as ‘exemplary’ (section 5.2.2). We have also seen how Georgina conceded that most team members do more travelling than they should in order to visit clients, even though they advice clients on ‘work-life balance’ (section 5.2.3). Thus, the list of benefits promoted by FlexiTeam (section 1.1.3) is therefore not a predictable outcome of implementing teleworking. Rather, what teleworking means, and the forms of behaviour it anticipates, has to be actively interpreted, negotiated and enacted by those so labelled as ‘teleworkers’ within the context of their social relationships at work.

In addition to exploring the inconsistencies *within* FlexiTeam’s consultancy discourse, the analysis has furthermore yet to explore the relationship *between* this and other discourses. FlexiTeam are accountable to many different discourses at work, discourses that are not always complementary and mutually reinforcing. In the conclusion of the previous chapter it was suggested that the

multiple forms of accountability FlexiTeam face in their social relationships with a) clients, b) TechnoCo and c) within the team appeared to act *in unison* to generate a normalised 'exemplary, profitable, team player' subjectivity on the part of team members. This is only one possible form of inter-relationship between the various discourses. Discourses can also generate *competing, contradictory and ambiguous* forms of accountability. Indeed, on occasions FlexiTeam encountered certain discrepancies, schisms, fractures and tensions between the various discourses to which they were subject. This section explores how FlexiTeam dealt with one such instance of competing discourses, with a view to exploring its implications for a theory of subjectivity.

It would be expected that FlexiTeam religiously implement the 'best practice' they advise to clients. Yet as described in section 6.1 above, Member1 and Member2 did not think this was the case. They both expressed a concern about social isolation due to the infrequency of face-to-face meetings. This appeared to result in a feeling of cynicism, where Member1 complained that the team was failing to "*practice what they preach*"³¹. An example of this 'preaching' was given earlier in section 4.3.6. During the "Managing Dispersed Teams" consultancy workshop I attended, Martin berated the managers of virtual teams participating in the workshop for putting customer demands above 'teamwork' by cancelling team meetings. This presents a dilemma for the analyst. How might a team so clearly committed to being 'exemplars of best practice', who stress to clients the value and importance of holding regular face-to-face team meetings, be accused of such hypocrisy by Member1? It is anticipated that addressing this question may

³¹ It is important to remember that Member1 expressed this cynicism to the researcher in private, not in front of the team. It was therefore a situated narrative, constructed in the light of the social relationship with an outside researcher.

offer insight into the complexity and indeterminacy of the subjectivity/discourse relationship.

Of course, this question is not meant to suggest that FlexiTeam deliberately and consciously contravene the advice they offer to clients. Hypocrisy is hardly an attractive identity concept one would wish to defend. Team members appeared to try hard to maintain consistency between their advice and their own actions. Nevertheless, implementing 'best practice' was not necessarily straightforward because, among other things, the discourse was situated within an organisational context of other, not necessarily compatible, discourses. FlexiTeam were held accountable for their decisions in many spheres – two obvious spheres being their relationships with clients and TechnoCo (see sections 5.2 and 5.3 respectively) – making their own consultancy discourse only one source of influence among many. It is in this context we may be able to make sense of the example that shall now be analysed, where FlexiTeam contradicted their consultancy advice and cancelled their forthcoming team meeting.

The team members participating in the Monday morning audio-conference were discussing what to do about their diary commitments for the following month. It appeared that the date provisionally set for the Team Meeting clashed with the deadline for submitting proposal documents to clients to bid for Government funded consultancy work. Martin (the team leader) initiated the conversation by asking Barry, who was in charge of organising this bidding work, what sort of timescale for the proposals was involved:

- 1 Martin: *"When do they [clients] have to make their decision?"*
- 2 Barry: *"Let me just dig it out: it's in one of my emails. [pause] It's the 27th ... the week after we meet them they're gonna have to say effectively 'yes or no'. Which is the thing about the proposal*

- and going to see them, you see. ... The 27th is when the client makes the decision. So it's a case of – do we realistically think on that basis that we're gonna have enough time to ping them a proposal and?"
- 3 Martin: *"I'm just thinking whether I could push the interviews out. [interviews for vacancy in team]"*
- 4 Barry: *"If that is the case, I think realistically, in the cold light of day, having looked at my calendar, I think we're only gonna have time to ping them a proposal."*
- 5 Martin: *"OK. We may need to do something that I don't wanna do, which is actually to postpone the team meeting on the 25th."*
- 6 Barry: *"So that'll give us another day to try and get clients?"*
- 7 Martin: *"/yep. Well if we've fixed interviews in that week and other meetings and stuff. And if I shift the interviews you [Barry] won't be around to help with them, so I've then got to find someone else. [Barry was going to help interview for the vacancy]. If I could free up one more day."*
- 8 Kevin: *"One thing you might want to consider is the launch of the [internal marketing event] on the 14th, and maybe do something around that for the Team Meeting? Do the morning after? ... I was just thinking, if you need to move the Team Meeting."*
- 9 Martin: *"I suggest we cancel the Team Meeting and we use that as one of the dates that I know that everyone will be around. ... Sorry Carol. [the chair arranging the cancelled meeting]"*
- 10 Carol: *"That's alright. That's fine."*
- 11 Martin: *"... how about we keep it nice and simple and say [to client] 'we'll be sending this out early next week, we'd like to follow up with a face-to-face meeting on 26th or 27th.'" "*
- 12 Carol: *"So TM on 15th August, yep?"*
- 13 Martin: *Yes, we'll do something to compensate, Carol, yep. OK? Well that's a decision anyway."*

To re-interpret this conversation, the team members appear to firstly establish the 'facts' around the issue – the client deadline they are working towards (turns 1-2). Barry then poses the 'problem' of not having time to send a proposal *and* visit the client before the deadline (turn 2). Martin follows this by considering other alternatives, such as postponing the interviews for a new team member (turn 3). Barry suggests that they may have to reassess their aspirations to visit clients (in

the hope of persuading the client in person to choose FlexiTeam for the consultancy work) and make do with just emailing the proposal (turn 4).

It is in this context that Martin 'reluctantly' suggests cancelling the Team Meeting (turn 5). He poses this decision as the result of the external circumstances just established, not his personal choice. Barry starts to recount the benefits of doing so (turn 6), and Martin collaborates in positing cancelling as the only plausible option due to existing interviewing arrangements (turn 7). Kevin helps by suggesting a convenient substitute date for the Team Meeting the next month (turn 8). Martin reiterates the benefit of cancelling - making things "*nice and simple*" for the client - and apologises to chair of meeting, Carol, who accepts the cancellation and suggested new date (turns 9-12). Martin finalises by saying another meeting will be arranged to "*compensate*" but that the prior talk constitutes a "*decision*" now closed to debate (turn 13).

This data extract shows how holding monthly team meetings – as per the consultancy discourse constructed by FlexiTeam themselves – is not easy to implement when team members' time is accountable to their clients as well as their team mates. What is interesting about this conversation is the way in which the participants collaborate in establishing that cancelling the team meeting is the only plausible option if the potential clients are to receive the all-important personal visit, as well as the proposal document. FlexiTeam manage the contradiction of their own advice by stressing that the problem was externally imposed by the client deadline, reiterating the value of putting the customer first, and vowing to compensate with another meeting soon. In other words, they may have temporarily contradicted their own advice, but the moral hierarchy that

values team meetings was left in tact. The decision appeared to be legitimised through an appeal to another powerful discourse – putting the customer first.

The process through which this ‘contradiction’ was managed is reminiscent of the conversation about updating ClientInfo database described in section 4.3.1. The participants generated solutions they termed “*pragmatic*” and “*short-term*”, while keeping alive their more fundamental value of using technology to access information ‘anywhere, anytime’ by reiterating its worth as “*great*” and “*brilliant*”. In both cases the teleworking consultancy discourse could not be straightforwardly implemented, regardless of the degree of internalisation on the part of team members.

The conclusion that may be reached from the analysis of this data is that the conduct of team members was not determined by the teleworking consultancy discourse, even if team members are identified with the discourse they deploy in their consultancy work. This questions the notion that discourse *determines* subjectivity by highlighting the ambiguity, tension and multiple forms of accountability to which team members were subject. Although this data does not rest easily into the category ‘resistance’, it does question the notion that discourse has a totalising effect, even among a team that produce the discourse themselves. Team members displayed an ability to manoeuvre within and between discourses in their attempts to manage their working lives³². This helps to make sense of how the complaints of Member1 and Member2 could arise in a team that also strives to ‘practice what they preach’.

6.3 Career and Instrumental Commitment

The analysis has so far focussed on data pertaining to the experiences of participants while they were members of FlexiTeam. This is largely because, unsurprisingly, most of the data I collected was about team members' concerns in their current role. Yet every team member had obviously also been employed in different roles prior to joining FlexiTeam. Many would invariably move to different positions in the future. Indeed, two team members left the team for other jobs during my period of fieldwork. The social relationships that constructed team members' subjectivity clearly extended beyond the immediate everyday relationships (with clients, TechnoCo and within the team) examined so far in this thesis. The discourses to which they are subject are therefore not limited to those involved in their accountability to clients, their employing company and the team.

Another discourse concerning 'career' seemed to be important as an organising concept for team members' experience, one that was of course largely prompted by the researcher's original research agenda and interview questions (see Appendix 1). This section aims to discuss the broader career narratives of team members in the hope of exploring further the limitations to the normalising power of the teleworking consultancy discourse. The discussion widens the temporal frame of the analysis to consider how participants make sense of 'teleworking evangelism' in the context of their wider 'project of the self'. It will be argued that, through the discourse of 'career', some team members do indeed account for

³² This is not to suggest that team members were able to 'stand outside' these discourses and adjudicate between them, employing those which best served their 'interests' at the time. Team members' identity was necessarily constructed in the context of the discourses at play in their social relationships at work. Rather, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue, "employees ... more or less actively and critically interpret and

their relationship to their current role in terms 'identification', but the accounts of others suggest more 'instrumental' performances of commitment.

To start with 'complete identification', the accounts offered by team leader Eric perhaps best fit into this category. Eric's account of his experience is very different to being subjected to 'top-down' change. Eric was not subject to a discourse devised and imposed by senior management in TechnoCo. Eric described how he 'sold' the concept of teleworking, a concept he developed in his MBA project, to senior management (see section 4.1). He presented *himself* as the catalyst or 'change agent' of the TechnoCo teleworking program 'Work-anywhere'. FlexiTeam then arose out of the 'success' of 'Work-anywhere'. In this respect, FlexiTeam was very much 'his baby'. Eric saw himself as an entrepreneur, and in our interview he explained how he saw the team as effectively his own 'business':

"I always wanted to run my own business. ... Effectively that's what I've done with this team. I've created it from scratch."

Eric had invested a large part of his career identity in the success of FlexiTeam. Teleworking evangelism was therefore the central theme in constructing his career narrative.

The rest of the team seemed to be aware of Eric's level of personal identification with promoting teleworking. Eric saw the team as being highly 'dependent' upon his identification with the job of teleworking evangelist. As he explained in our interview:

enact" (p.628) discourses as they attempt to "reflexively ... accomplish life projects out of various sources of influence and inspiration" (p. 622).

“One thing that concerns a lot of the team is [pause] If I went, it would leave a question mark about how, where, y’know - I’m not saying it [FlexiTeam] won’t win but there’d be a big question about it. Because of what I do, my experience of doing it, and my name is attached to it.”

The very success and viability of FlexiTeam is thought to be largely dependent upon Eric’s personal commitment to the project. Indeed, Terry recognised this dependency upon Eric’s commitment and ‘passion’ about teleworking:

“The team is very dependent on Eric. He has a particular style about him and almost runs it as a personal passion as well. If Eric went it would be difficult to see the team carrying on in the same way. ... Eric runs it as almost a personal crusade as well, he’s passionate about the whole subject and [pause] the way he fights it internally - in ways we sometimes don’t even know or appreciate it - then I think it would be difficult to replicate with anybody else.”

As a brief aside, Eric did in fact leave the team during my fieldwork study, although the team is still in existence with Martin as the team leader. What proved interesting was the job Eric went on to perform – setting up a rival teleworking consultancy group in another firm. Being a ‘teleworking evangelist’ appeared to be an integral part of Eric’s career identity. Of all the team members, Eric appeared to be the most identified with the teleworking consultancy discourse.

Eric is clearly regarded as having a huge subjective investment in the concept of teleworking. Yet the fear about the future of the team without Eric’s leadership expressed in the quotes above suggests not only an awareness of their reliance on Eric’s strong identification, but also crucially implies a somewhat weaker identification on the part of the other team members. The question remaining is therefore: do the rest of the team display such complete identification with selling

teleworking? Team members do express a great deal of commitment and loyalty to Eric himself, for example Carol:

"I feel very very loyal to Eric. ... He's so great, he's lovely ... he can climb mountains."

Team members' commitment to their charismatic leader does not appear to be in doubt. What remains in question is their level of commitment to the job of teleworking consultancy. The 'teleworking consultancy' role was not the conception of team members, like it was for Eric; it was simply a job that they heard about and applied for. For those who were already teleworkers and enjoyed this way of working before joining the team, this would presumably translate easily into identification with being a teleworking evangelist. As Georgina stated:

"It's not right for everybody though. This group [FlexiTeam] - everybody has chosen to be doing what we're doing, by and large - and it does work well."

This emphasis on 'choice' was, as we saw earlier, reiterated by Member2:

"I mean they [other team members] like what they're doing, ... they joined because of the way they get to work."

Identification with teleworking evangelism may therefore be straightforward for team members who had previously 'chosen' to telework before joining FlexiTeam. Yet for Member1 and Member2, who were described above as expressing dissatisfaction with teleworking, identifying with the role of teleworking evangelist may be less straightforward. The question is therefore: how can we characterise the level of identification of team members other than Eric, who founded the team?

The data presented above helps to shed light on this question. Both Eric and Terry doubted the survival of FlexiTeam without the leadership of Eric. This not only emphasised the commitment of Eric, but also highlights the tenuous nature of the commitment of the other team members to being teleworking consultants. This calls into question the team members' level of identification with the teleworking consultancy discourse. Team members appeared to be enthused by their inspiring leader, but the future of the team without Eric as leader seemed to be viewed as more precarious.

However, to assert that team members may not be as identified with the evangelical role as Eric is not to claim that team members fail to *perform* identification with the consultancy discourse. As argued above (section 6.1), resistance to the discourse was rarely observed within the team. Chapter 4 also described the highly disciplined and hard-working identities performed by team members on a daily basis. This is one of the major paradoxes that may require closer analysis. How can we make sense of data that suggests team members may be subjectively distanced from the discourse while simultaneously displaying complete internalisation of the discourse?

One way of interpreting this data is to point to the inherent ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction inherent in team members' subjective relationship to the teleworking consultancy discourse. Yet ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction are not attractive identity concepts and are hard to account for and manage. On the other hand, the concept of 'career' seemed to offer team members a way of making sense of this dynamic. Prompted by the researcher in an interview concept, but also during informal conversations, team members

seemed to construct a narrative that made sense of their current role in terms of their wider 'project of the self' through the discourse of having a 'career'. Through this discourse, team members were able to draw links between their current role and their broader career history and aspirations. As an identity concept, having a 'career' seemed to offer team members a sense of coherence, direction, meaning, connection, values and self-awareness with which to construct their 'narrative of the self' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For example, even while team members expressed a satisfaction with their current job in FlexiTeam, none denied the possibility of moving to another job at some time in the future. As Barry explained:

"While I'm learning and enjoying what I'm doing I don't wanna look up. Maybe every two years I will ... ask what have I learnt? What challenged me? What was I good at? What was I bad at? What do I need to do next, stay here or get another job?"

Due to the unique role of the team within TechnoCo, a future job would probably not involve promoting virtual teamwork. For example, Nigel's loyalty to team leader Eric was never questioned, but shortly after Eric left the team Nigel also moved to another job within TechnoCo. His new role was in e-government and required commitment to a new (but related) set of priorities and values to sell to clients³³. Nigel was hardly troubled by the subjective shift of moving from the teleworking consultancy discourse towards adopting the orientation demanded by the new role. He happily explained the details of what he was trying to sell in his new job when I interviewed him.

³³ This new discourse of e-government was nevertheless consistent with the wider discourse constructed by the company wherein technology is seen as a necessary and valuable part of business and the home. In other words, moving within TechnoCo still involves some relationship to TechnoCo's primary business of selling technology to corporate clients or domestic customers.

This suggests that the consultancy discourse had failed to 'govern his soul' such that his sense that his subjectivity was normalised in a total fashion by the teleworking consultancy discourse. The discourse to which he was subject in FlexiTeam may not therefore be 'identity defining' to the extent suggested by most of the data I gathered while he was a member of FlexiTeam. Rather, it may be suggested that, in accordance with the theory of subjectivity presented in the literature review (section 2.4), Nigel reflexively constructed his identity in the context of his local social relations. This context invariably changed as he moved jobs. In his new job, Nigel appeared to adapt his identity performances accordingly without a great deal of subjective anxiety. He now acts as an evangelist of e-government to his clients, not a teleworking evangelist. It may be suggested that Nigel strives to 'do a good job' in whatever role he performs, by adapting to the challenges and requirements of his new role. His identity therefore appears to be open, reflexive, situated and dynamic; never fixed but in an ongoing process of construction.

The term 'instrumental commitment' seems to offer some analytical purchase on Nigel's relationship to FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse. He performed a strong commitment to the FlexiTeam role, but on the basis of the good reputation built during his time in FlexiTeam he moved to another job to further his 'career' as part of his wider 'project of the self'. The term 'instrumental' is not intended to refer to economic self-interest, although team members may at times appeal to this notion to account for their actions. Rather, team members may at times 'instrumentalise' their relationship to the teleworking consultancy discourse in seeking to construct a *consistent* career narrative, one that attempts to make sense of the contradiction between being committed to their current job and simultaneously 'looking beyond' FlexiTeam.

The legitimacy of team members' identity in the team depends on the careful management of these two aspects: being a committed member of FlexiTeam while acknowledging a possible future outside the team. Chapter 5 argued that the legitimacy of team members' identity might be under threat unless they successfully perform a commitment to their current job. From the findings presented in section 5.4, it is clear that a team member failing to be seen as 'going the extra mile' for the team does not go unnoticed. From section 5.3 it is clear that team members are also expected to put the needs of the team above their own needs, acting as 'defenders of the team' to maintain their precarious status and employment in TechnoCo. In addition, failing to perform internalisation of the consultancy discourse would hardly benefit the client relationship and be conducive to the sales process, as described in section 5.2. Thus, even though career narratives suggest an *instrumental* relationship with their current role, this simultaneously appears to require a delicate balance with a performance of *commitment* to their current role. The term 'instrumental commitment' therefore goes some way to capturing the ambiguity and paradox of team members' subjective relationship to the teleworking consultancy discourse.

Another analytical concept found in the literature on subjectivity in organisations is 'resigned behavioural compliance' (see section 2.6). This concept appears less appropriate for conceptualising team members' relationship to their consultancy discourse. Team members did not refer to their actions as resigned or reluctant. Rather, team members more often demonstrated passion and enthusiasm about their role as teleworking consultants. This may be grounded in their active role in constructing their consultancy discourse, as opposed to being passive recipients of a managerially designed discourse. In addition, team members oriented to the

discourse not only on a behavioural level but also on a *normative* level. Team members not only had to *do* teleworking but also *be* embodiments of 'best practice'. The discourse appeared to operate not only through their actions but also their *identity*. Team members acted as evangelists of teleworking, offering to clients personal testimonies of the virtues of teleworking.

Furthermore, the 'locus of control' to which they must 'comply' was hard to distinguish in the case of FlexiTeam, making the term 'resigned behavioural compliance' appear inappropriate. The consultancy discourse was not imposed from above by senior management, but was generated by the team itself. The term *commitment* may therefore be better fitting than *compliance*. In sum, the term 'instrumental commitment' appears to have greater analytical purchase on the data I collected than the term 'resigned behavioural compliance'. This data includes reflection about the researcher's relationship to FlexiTeam's consultancy discourse.

Indeed, reflecting upon my fieldwork experience, the term 'instrumental commitment' also seems appropriate for characterising my own relationship to FlexiTeam's teleworking consultancy discourse. I obviously wanted to 'fit in' and be seen to 'say the right thing'. For example, I gave a presentation to the team upon my return from a teleworking conference, and wrote the piece on 'tips' for teleworkers (Appendix 3), both according to the team's instrumentally rational concern with promoting and selling teleworking. As far as the team were concerned, the researcher performed identification with their discourse of teleworking consultancy. On the other hand, I would characterise my position as at best 'agnostic' about the worth and workings of virtual teamwork. Ambiguity

may also be a relevant concept, as I was also busy developing the critical perspective presented in this thesis.

However, put into the context of my social relationship with the team, I understandably wanted to maintain a good relationship with the team in order to continue conducting my research. I can also reflect upon my more general desire to be 'liked' and not generate tension or conflict in a group who had so kindly let me study them. I therefore performed a commitment to their consultancy discourse, whilst also maintaining a more instrumental distance from its doctrines. It thus seems inappropriate to suggest that my subjectivity was 'normalised' by the discourse of teleworking consultancy, even though this may have been the identity I performed in front of the team. The concept of 'instrumental commitment' therefore seems useful for characterising the researcher's relationship to the discourse.

'Instrumental commitment' also appears to be a useful concept for helping to make sense of the apparently paradoxical data I gathered about Member3 (anonymous to protect confidentiality). In the space of one day of my fieldwork, I gathered data about Member3 that, upon analysis, appeared contradictory and therefore required closer scrutiny. During the team meeting I noted down that Member3 told everyone about promoting the team's consultancy services during leisure time over dinner with friends. When I later came to analyse this, I saw a straightforward example of 'complete identification'. However, later the same day I also observed Member3 displaying a more instrumental relationship to FlexiTeam by telling me about the progress of the latest job application. The new job was based in London and, ironically, did not even involve working from home!

To apply for another job that involves commuting to an office hardly suggests that Member3 had internalised the discourse regarding the virtues of teleworking. Yet Member3 also gave a convincing performance of internalisation at the team meeting. How might the researcher make analytical sense of this data? One useful sensitising concept could again be the notion of 'career'. The term 'career' invokes a relationship not only with team member's immediate day-to-day experiences, but also a connection to narratives about the past and their future work life. Career helps to stretch the temporal frame of the analysis and develop a richer understanding of how team members' subjectivity might be constituted.

Indeed, during the interviews I conducted, team members produced narratives wherein their commitment to FlexiTeam's discourse was situated in a broader narrative about their past, present and future career. Subjective commitment to the current role was in each case emphasised, often through a sense of pride in 'doing a good job'. Yet the current role was placed in context of a more long-term 'project of the self' whereby team members 'develop their potential'. To be clear, not every participant of my study was 'career oriented' in this sense. The manager of the finance team I studied even stated that he was not interested in having a 'career' and did not aspire to a more senior position. Yet within FlexiTeam, the notion of having a 'career' and being 'responsible' for its trajectory seemed an important organising concept in their narratives.

In the context of the organisational insecurity and turbulence perceived by the team (see section 5.3), it is understandable that team members were looking at other options and feeling that they must take personal responsibility for their careers. Team members also recognised that promotion prospects within the

team were limited and therefore a move 'upwards' would invariably mean a move out of the team. As Georgina explained:

"If you were actively looking for promotion you'd have to be looking outside the team."

However, the teleworking consultancy discourse had a very localised audience within the team. Any move outside the team would invariably involve a commitment to another (distinct but not necessarily incompatible) discourse pertinent to the new role, like was the case for Nigel in his new e-government role. This appears to cast doubt upon the level of internalisation characteristic of team members who foresee possible futures outside the team.

Nevertheless, foreseeing a future outside the team is not necessarily antithetical to displaying a commitment to the current teleworking consultancy role. These two aspects of their experience - their present role and their future aspirations – were seen as related and interconnected. Barry explained this relationship in our interview:

"I think to realise your career you've got to be good, or attempt to be as good as you can be, at what your doing now. Okay. Erm, [pause] from experience I have seen people try to think about the next step before they're established in the one they're in, yeah. ... So it's about understanding the delivery now."

Barry's narrative about 'realising your career' seemed to help make a connection between team members' long-term career aspirations in the context of their current role. Doing a 'good job' in the current role, in the case of FlexiTeam performing identification with being a telework evangelist, was rationalised as instrumental in the service of longer-term career goals – a career that may well take the team member into a role other than teleworking consultancy. Even if

team members are instrumental in their relationship to teleworking consultancy in this sense, this does not eliminate the imperative to display a commitment to being a good teleworking consultant. This was elucidated in my interview with Darren. When I asked Darren what he felt was important for realising his career aspirations, he translated this long-term perspective into a philosophy for action on a day-by-day level – one that he expects from his team-mates as well as himself.

Interviewer: *“What do you think is important for getting ahead in your career?”*

Darren: *“Commitment. [pause] For me, if you can demonstrate commitment, and I hate to use the phrase but ‘go the extra mile’, I think that’s the best you can get out of anyone. That’s what I look for when I work with people as well, would they do that for me and would I do that for them. ... I couldn’t be in a job I wasn’t committed to. ... The company goes through massive change, but with every change it seems to become clearer that that’s what they’re looking for. It’s a new company now and if you’re not gonna pull your weight and be committed to the team or your own individual job then you’re not going to survive.”*

Barry and Darren’s interpretation of the connection between their current job and their career may us help to understand the data regarding Member3 presented above. Member3 performed an identity committed to promoting teleworking at the team meeting, in accordance with the interests of the team and TechnoCo, while also applying for another job that did not even involve teleworking. The former may benefit the latter if the respect and recognition of team-mates and superiors is understood to benefit your career in the long run. Poor performance or a visible lack of commitment in the current job certainly does not improve your ‘track record’ and reputation within the organisation. Team members understandably want FlexiTeam to be a success and to be held in high regard by their team-

mates in the sense that it reflects positively upon their own career identities. To reiterate what Eric stated earlier:

“Everyone wants to be part of a winning team.”

Thus, team members made sense of the link between their current job and their future working lives through the discourse of ‘career’. Commitment to their current job is seen to benefit their career, even if this ironically involved leaving their current team. The ‘career’ discourse appears to help participants, and the researcher, make sense of the complexity and ambiguity of their experiences. It also suggests that team members’ identification with the teleworking consultancy discourse may be less one of normalisation and more one of instrumental performances of commitment.

Summary

In summary, this section has argued that perhaps only Eric appears to be identified with the discourse in a ‘total’ manner. Consistent with his ‘telework evangelism’ career identity, he left for a new job promoting teleworking. For others, various degrees of identification may be observed. For many, the term ‘instrumental commitment’ appeared to aid our understanding of how team members rationalised the importance of commitment in the current job, in order to realise their longer-term ‘project of the self’.

Career is therefore a concept that can help to make analytical sense of both the work and discipline performed by team members on a daily basis (Chapter 4), as it is configured through the discursive construction of their subjectivity in their social relationships at work (Chapter 5), *and* the recognition that the discourse

may fall short of totalised normative control of team members' subjectivity (this chapter). This section has therefore also reminded the reader that identity is not fixed, determined or constituted through any one discourse. It may be that team members are not so much committed to promoting virtual teamwork *per se*, but they are identified with a professional/managerial career identity in which being committed to your job and your team is a central premise.

The suggestion is not that 'career' be regarded as an 'explanatory variable' in any positivistic sense. Rather, career can be seen as a sensitising concept for the researcher. The concept enabled a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the data gathered, data that was of course in no small part prompted by the researcher. For participants, career narratives seemed to enable them to make sense of their experiences in terms of an overarching 'project of the self'. 'Career' offered the potential for team members to construct a relatively coherent and consistent narrative about their work lives, amongst the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of their everyday experiences. Team members' subjectivity was therefore an open, multiple, reflexive - but never totalised - construction.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter shall discuss the central findings of my research, offer critical reflection on these findings, then suggest some possible conclusions of the research before finally outlining some avenues for future research. First, the arguments presented in the thesis are summarised to draw out the central findings of my research (7.1). Second, the results are considered in relation to other studies by authors presented in the literature review (7.2). This involves a discussion of the ways in which the results of my study both support and refute the findings of other authors, how my study constitutes an original contribution to the field, and how my study contributes to the advancement of theory regarding subjectivity in organisations. The thesis concludes by discussing the implications of this study for other scholars interested in subjectivity and organisational control, and outlines some potential avenues for future research (7.3).

7.1 Summary of Findings

The aim of this section is to remind the reader of the central arguments that were presented in this thesis. This will begin with a summary of the main points established from the review of existing literature, towards which my study variously orients itself as a critique and contribution.

Point 1: Practitioner-oriented literature presents virtual teamwork as a ‘managerial problem’, to which ‘best practice solutions are offered.

The introductory chapter introduced the notions of teleworking and teamwork. A body of literature aimed at practicing managers orients to the union of these two concepts – in the form of a ‘virtual team’ – as a managerial *problem*. It was presented as problematic for employees to work *together* effectively while being *apart*. This problematic is framed not only in terms of a technological issue but also a management issue. The practitioner literature rests on the assumption that virtual teamwork requires not only the implementation of new technology, but also requires new forms of business practice and processes. Indeed, this is the rationale that also underlies the consultancy work of FlexiTeam.

The ‘best practice’ prescribed within this literature, which is similar to the advice given by FlexiTeam to their clients, was categorised along four aspects. Virtual teamwork was presented as requiring changes to communication practices, knowledge sharing, managerial control and trust. In each case, specific recommendations were proposed for how to implement ‘best practice’ and achieve business ‘success’ from virtual teams (according to measures such as productivity, profitability and effectiveness).

Point 2: Practitioner literature presents virtual teamwork as requiring a ‘culture change’.

These changes recommended in the practitioner literature appeared to address the fundamental beliefs, norms, values, practices and policies of the organisation. In other words, what was being recommended was a change in organisational *culture*. Culture change was presented by the practitioner literature, and for that matter by FlexiTeam, as a necessary element of achieving successful virtual teamwork.

Identifying virtual teamwork as an instance of culture change suggests that a review of literature regarding organisational change in general may be worthwhile. This review enabled me to explore what insights could be drawn from research into other organisational change programs. This involved literature on recent trends such as Business Process Reengineering, Total Quality Management and teamwork. In particular, it was argued that a review of literature that takes a *critical* perspective on these changes may have the advantage of highlighting questions that were not addressed by the mainstream, management-oriented practitioner literature.

Point 3: Practitioner literature appeared to have a ‘missing subject’ – the social consequences of virtual teamwork are inadequately addressed.

The practitioner literature contained an implicit assumption that virtual teamwork is both politically neutral and universally beneficial. However, by addressing questions from the perspective of business managers in the search of instrumentally rational solutions to the ‘problems’ of managing virtual teams, the management literature was conspicuous in the absence of the perspective of the virtual team member. In other words, the practitioner literature appeared to involve a ‘missing subject’.

The review of critical literature helped to place the perspective of the subject centre stage and tackle questions regarding the social consequences of virtual teamwork. It was argued that a critical perspective has the ability to take seriously issues such as power, politics, control and resistance. This discussion therefore firstly addressed the silence within the practitioner literature regarding the forms of labour and discipline on the part of team members required to sustain the

arrangement. The perspective of the 'labouring subject' was often hidden or 'deleted' within public accounts of virtual teamwork. The critical perspective developed in this thesis suggested a radical departure from the public accounts of teleworking that stress the flexibility and work-life balance enabled by flexible working. This literature review therefore enabled me to establish the significance of my first research question.

Point 4: Critical literature argues that employee subjectivity is an important aspect of contemporary modes of organisational control.

The second research question was then addressed by reviewing literature on the issue of managerial control and employee commitment. This question is important because the practitioner literature on virtual teams appeared conspicuous in its absence of questions about how consent and commitment to the new practices is secured from team members. Yet this is a significant omission if it accepted that organisations are fundamentally dependent upon the co-operation of the workers they aim to control. Indeed, the issue of control was thought to be especially problematic where the aim is not only to secure the reluctant physical compliance of workers, but to also secure the willing subjective commitment of workers to the new organisational culture. It was argued that *subjectivity* is a significant medium and outcome of contemporary managerial control strategies.

It was therefore important to review the growing body of literature that critically interrogates the issue of employee subjectivity. This literature was seen to be significant in questioning the notion that the subjective commitment of 'trusted' workers is the antithesis of the more direct control strategies of the past. Research was presented that offered insight into the disciplinary power,

surveillance and control involved in organisational change programs. Following this literature review, a central question for this thesis was therefore to investigate how the discourses associated with virtual teamwork might generate normalised, self-disciplined subjects.

Point 5: Critical literature would benefit from a more robust investigation of managerial subjectivity.

The existing critical literature exhibits a tendency to concentrate on 'top-down' models of organisational change, thereby missing the opportunity to investigate fully the dynamics of managerial subjectivity. In particular, the subjectivity of those managers who are active in the production of organisational discourses has yet to be sufficiently explored. Exploring the meaning of discourse not only for those for whom it is formulated, but also *for those who do the formulating*, can be seen as a 'critical case'. It enables the discursive constitution of subjectivity to be explored where it would be expected to be the most complete. It may be anticipated that the reflexive dynamic of production/consumption could result in a more powerful and insidious normalisation of subjectivity. Investigating this phenomenon empirically therefore offers much in the way of insight for advancing theory regarding subjectivity. This is the project taken up by this study.

Point 6: The challenge for the analyst is to go beyond 'discourse determinism' and explore the complexity and indeterminacy of the subjectivity/discourse relationship.

Existing literature has much to offer in developing a sophisticated theory of subjectivity to inform my analysis. In particular, literature that questions the totalising, omnipotent and determining power of discourse offers great insight into the complexities of employee subjectivity. This literature enabled me to explore perspectives pertaining to my third and final research question. First, literature

that questions both the possibility and desirability of 'managing culture' and 'colonising subjectivity' was reviewed. Second, literature was examined that explicated a range of possible subjective responses to cultural control. This involved a critical examination of issues of power and resistance. Third, a more sophisticated theory of subjectivity was presented that involved analysis of the contextual development of identity within local social relations. This literature addressed the local interpretation and 'manoeuvring' around discourse performed by workers and sought to understand variation in discursive constitution. Fourth and finally, critical literature was reviewed that highlighted the tendency toward 'individualisation' within organisational power relations. It was suggested that 'individualisation' might be an important issue to investigate in this study with respect to virtual teamwork.

In conclusion, the literature review suggested that an important question for my empirical research might therefore be to investigate how team members' subjectivity may be constructed through the local interpretation of discourse about virtual teamwork. This project was taken up in the form of a nine-month 'virtual' ethnography of FlexiTeam; a team of ten employees in a large UK-based telecommunications company. The findings of my study are now summarised in turn in order to build up the central argument of this thesis.

Argument 1: Virtual teamwork can be described in terms of 'labour' and 'self-discipline', in contrast to the public accounts of virtual teamwork as 'effortless' and 'flexible'.

After briefly introducing the team and describing their role as consultants, the first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) began by presented a 'scenario' of virtual teamwork based on my ethnography. This scenario was constructed in a genre not unlike

those constructed by those who promote teleworking, such as FlexiTeam. It presented virtual teamwork as a seamless, flexible and mutually beneficial way of working. The credibility of this scenario rests upon an unquestioning acceptance of the nature and reality of virtual teamwork constructed within practitioner-oriented and promotional accounts, such as those produced by FlexiTeam. This thesis sought to open to critical reflection many of the assumptions about the 'seamless', 'effortless' and 'flexible' nature of virtual teamwork. The 'scenario' was therefore used as a contrast to the data presented in the rest of the chapter.

The critical approach advanced in this first data chapter attempted to address my first research question. Data was presented that described the forms of labour and self-discipline undertaken by FlexiTeam members in order to make virtual teamwork 'work'³⁴. This involved the labour and discipline associated with the client database, audio-conferences, being contactable, email, phoning, team meetings and travelling. The notion of labour and discipline stands in direct contrast to the taken-for-granted assumption that teleworking is effortless and flexible. It revealed a perspective on the 'labouring subjects' that were engaged in 'behind the scenes' work that was 'hidden' within accounts like the 'scenario' that portrayed virtual teamwork as seamless, natural and undemanding.

My ethnographic data suggested that virtual teamwork is not simply the predictable outcome of implementing 'best practice' but rather is a precarious accomplishment that requires the commitment, hard work and self-discipline of team members in order to be sustained. Thus, virtual teamwork is not inevitably

³⁴ The claim is not that the practices described in this thesis are causally linked to the success of FlexiTeam's virtual teamwork. This is the sort of prescriptive advice offered by FlexiTeam and the authors discussed in the literature review (section 2.1). This thesis presents data regarding the practices the participants *themselves* understand to be crucial for the success of virtual teamwork. As an ethnographer, I maintain an uncertainty regarding participants' interpretations (Latour and Woolgar, 1986).

'successful' nor does it automatically 'work'. It requires the consent and commitment of team members to the labour of 'making it work'. The issue of consent and commitment was taken up and explored in the next chapter.

Argument 2: FlexiTeam's practices (what they do) can be better understood in relation to their identity (who they are).

Chapter 4 described the forms of practice enacted by team members in order to sustain their virtual teamwork arrangement. Chapter 5 aimed to offer another level of analysis by putting this data into the context of FlexiTeam's identity at work. It was argued that team members' consent and commitment to enacting 'best practice' could be understood through an examination of their identity at work. The practices described in Chapter 4 are not incidental, unimportant aspects of team members' lives. They are given *meaning* and *significance* in the context of the discourses through which they construct their identity. In other words, it was argued that what FlexiTeam *do* could be better understood by exploring who FlexiTeam *are*. This was investigated using a theory of subjectivity as socially constituted through social relationships at work, as established in the literature review.

Chapter 5 therefore sought to address the second research question regarding how the identification and commitment to the discourse of 'best practice' may have been achieved. The assumption that FlexiTeam simply implement 'best practice' was interrogated by questioning how team members' subjectivity might be constituted by the discourses to which they were accountable at work.

Argument 3: The experience of virtual teamwork is contextually specific.

The importance of social context here is paramount to understanding how team members' subjectivity was constituted through the local social relations they experienced in their daily working lives. This was elucidated using a comparison between my ethnographic experience with FlexiTeam and the other two teams I also studied. From this it was clear that the experience of virtual teamwork was contextually specific. Virtual teamwork was different for FlexiTeam because being a 'successful virtual team' was a central part of their identity due to their role as teleworking consultants. FlexiTeam not only *are* a virtual team, they also *sell* the concept to clients. This was not the case for the finance team and the government team I also studied. This relationship between FlexiTeam and their clients, and the role it plays in constituting the subjectivity of team members, was the first issue to be analysed.

Argument 4: The Team-Client relationship generated accountability to their clients in terms of being 'exemplary'.

Chapter 5 first of all considered how the subjectivity of team members might be constituted through the team's relationship with clients. The significance of FlexiTeam's position in not only practicing teleworking but also *selling* teleworking consultancy services to clients was examined. FlexiTeam position themselves in relation to clients as experts on virtual teamwork who also 'practice what they preach'. In this sense, team members' subjectivity may in part be understood as constituted through their performance as an 'exemplary' team. FlexiTeam strive to be seen as embodiments of 'best practice'. This appeared to have a reflexive effect wherein team members endeavour to make FlexiTeam a 'success' in order to sell it to clients. This social relationship with clients seemed to go some way toward making sense of some of the labouring and self-disciplining practices detailed in Chapter 4.

Argument 5: The Team-TechnoCo relationship generated accountability to their employers in terms of being ‘profitable’.

Second, the chapter moved on to consider FlexiTeam’s relationship with their employers ‘TechnoCo’. It was argued that FlexiTeam enjoy a privileged but precarious position within TechnoCo. This insecurity appeared to constitute a significant pressure upon team members to legitimise and defend their organisational position. FlexiTeam were accountable to their superiors for making a profit, according to TechnoCo’s accounting measures. Team members were also keen to be ‘top of the food chain’ and sought to defend the team against internal politics and restructuring. It was suggested that FlexiTeam’s accountability to their employers and their political struggles within the firm may also aid the development of our understanding of the commitment to the labour and self-discipline detailed in Chapter 4.

Argument 6: The Intra-Team relationship generated accountability to their team-mates in terms of being a ‘team player’.

Third, the analysis considered the role of relationships within the team in constituting team members’ self-disciplined subjectivity. Going beyond the instrumentally-rational prescription regarding performance targets offered in the practitioner literature and advised by FlexiTeam to their clients, this section examined data that suggested team members were also subject to *social* pressures to perform at work. For example, team members were expected to ‘go the extra mile’ for the team. Peer surveillance appeared to be the primary mechanism for enforcing this social pressure upon team members to demonstrate their selfless commitment to the ‘team’. In particular, the ‘trust’ discourse outlined in the literature review seemed to play an important role in team members’ performances of being a ‘trustworthy’ team player.

Further, it was suggested that the 'visibility' discourse, through which reward and recognition is understood to be distributed, constituted an *individualising* effect upon team members' subjectivity. Not only were team members responsible for the workload of 'self-promotion', they were also referred back to themselves in the light of questions regarding the ethics and efficacy of this 'self-promotion' system. This has links to the literature on individualisation discussed in the literature review (2.8).

Argument 7: Team members' interactions within their social relations at work appear to generate normalised, self-disciplined subjectivity.

Chapter 5 concluded by drawing together these three social relationships and examining their inter-relationships. Team members' subjectivity appeared to be constituted by the pressure to perform an 'exemplary, profitable, team player' identity. Their subjectivity was constructed through the social relationships they negotiated on a daily basis with, among others, their clients, TechnoCo and the team.

The desire to be seen as an exemplary, profitable and team-oriented worker seemed to represent a norm of behaviour against which team members were held accountable. FlexiTeam's teleworking consultancy discourse came to establish what it meant to be a 'good' team member. This appeared to constitute self-disciplining behaviour on the part of those whose subjectivity was defined by these discourses. It was argued that the willingness of members to construct their world in terms of these discourses might be seen as an instance in the exercise of disciplinary power. The labour and discipline described in Chapter 4 may

therefore in part be understood as a medium and outcome of the normalised subjectivity constituted through these three social relationships.

However, this is only one way of conceptualising the discourse/subjectivity relationship. As established in the literature review, the central challenge for the analyst is to explore variation in discursive constitution. The limits, tensions, fractures, ambiguities, ironies and complexities of the discourse/subjectivity relationship in FlexiTeam were the subject for the next chapter.

Argument 8: Team members' subjectivity was not colonised or determined by the teleworking consultancy discourse.

In many respects, Chapter 6 sought to question and undermine the simplicity and determinism of the 'normalisation' argument that concluded Chapter 5. Ethnographic data was presented that called into question the simplistic assumption that self-disciplined behaviour arises from the construction of forms of subjectivity that are 'totalised' by the teleworking consultancy discourse. This argument was criticised using data that suggested a divergence from this 'totalising' thesis, in which employees are treated as passive recipients who simply internalise the discourse. This would enable me to address my third and final research question.

Argument 9: Team members' relationship to the discourse did not seem to fit neatly into the categories 'identification' or 'resistance'. The relationship was explored through the categories of dissatisfaction, discontent, disregard, cynicism, contradiction, career and instrumental commitment.

The data presented in Chapter 6 explored data regarding the forms of subjective responses to the teleworking consultancy discourse that do not fit neatly into a 'normalisation' framework. Member1 and Member2 expressed dissatisfaction,

discontent, and cynicism regarding the teleworking consultancy discourse. This suggested that the categories 'identification' or 'internalisation' were not appropriate for characterising their subjective relationship to the discourse. However, the term 'resistance', as discussed in the literature review, also appeared to be inappropriate for categorising this data. There was little room for voice regarding dissatisfaction with virtual teamwork in a team who were teleworking consultants. The irony was that the reflexivity FlexiTeam experience with clients seemed to limit reflexivity in terms of critically reflecting upon and improving their practices.

It was acknowledged that the researcher was also acting within this context. This offered space for reflection regarding how my subjectivity was constituted by my experience with the team. A tendency towards individualisation was also observed. Team members were expected to find individual solutions to problems that could have alternatively been managed collectively. For Member2, this solution of commuting to an office was somewhat ironic for a teleworking consultant.

Data regarding Nigel also invited further analysis for its insight into the complexity and ambiguity of the discourse/subjectivity relationship. Nigel's failure to adhere to the specific practices recommended for virtual teamwork, such as updating voicemail messages, appeared to be overlooked in the light of his more fundamental subjective orientation towards selling teleworking as a necessary and beneficial change. Nigel's disregard of the discourse of 'best practice virtual teamwork' seemed to be tolerated so long as he was deemed to contribute to the overall success of the team in terms of consultancy sales.

Another corrective to the notion of discourse determinism was elucidated through an example whereby FlexiTeam contradicted an aspect of their own consultancy advice by cancelling their team meeting. It was suggested that their consultancy discourse was not necessarily internally consistent, nor did it exist in isolation from other (not necessarily compatible) organisational discourses. FlexiTeam were seen to be subject to many, often competing, pressures of accountability. The conclusion from this was that, even for a team who sell the discourse, normalisation might not be a deterministic or unproblematic matter.

A further category of data was then presented that continued the critique of discourse determinism by questioning the 'totalising' power of the consultancy discourse. This data concerned the career narratives offered by team members. The temporal frame of the research was widened to consider how team members accounted for their current role in the context of their wider 'project of the self'. For the team leader Eric, it was argued that he expressed a strong identification with the 'teleworking evangelism' discourse as he incorporated this into his career narrative. Even when Eric left FlexiTeam, he left to set up another teleworking consultancy group in a rival firm.

The career narratives of other team members, on the other hand, often extended beyond their current consultancy discourse to include other more or less unrelated occupational roles. Yet this was not to suggest that team members failed to perform 'identification' with the discourse on an everyday basis. For example, Member3 performed commitment to promoting teleworking whilst simultaneously applying for another job, a job that did not even involve teleworking. The term 'instrumental commitment' was employed to make sense of this ambiguous and apparently contradictory data. Team members appeared to

perform identification with the discourse of promoting teleworking while also expressing a more instrumental relationship to the current role (by looking for another job, for example). Team members made sense of the relationship between their current role and their long-term career project of the self in terms of furthering the latter through performing well in the former. In other words, it appeared that team members were less committed to the teleworking evangelism discourse as they were interested in constructing a professional career identity in which 'being committed to your job and your team' was a central theme.

The concept of career was used to help to make analytical sense of both the work and discipline performed by team members on a daily basis (Chapter 4), as it is subjectively configured through team member's identity negotiations in the context of their local social relationships (see Chapter 5), whilst *including* the recognition that the discourse may fall short of totalised normative control of team members subjectivity (Chapter 6). This forms a limited and partial attempt at a theoretical synthesis of the data presented in the three chapters. It also develops a theory of subjectivity as an open, reflexive, indeterminate, ongoing process of construction. Subjectivity is therefore not totalised by any one discourse, even in a team whose job involves selling that discourse.

7.2 Discussion, Reflections and Conclusion

This section aims to discuss the implications of the findings of my study. First, the implications of the research findings for the future of teleworking and virtual teamwork are discussed (7.2.1). Second, the findings are explored in relation to theories regarding the role of technology in organisations (7.2.2). Third, the

findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and theories of the subjectivity/discourse relationship (7.2.3).

7.2.1 The Findings in Relation to Teleworking

My thesis has adopted an explicitly critical stance on teleworking. This critical stance does not reflect a personal bias on my part. Nor does it purport to offer a more 'real' or 'accurate' picture of virtual teamwork. The critical stance was adopted for its potential to address questions that have previously been sidelined in the dominant 'managerialist' literature on teleworking. This enabled the social consequences of the teleworking consultancy discourse to be explored.

However, it is important to consider the unique role of FlexiTeam when drawing conclusions about teleworking from my ethnography. For groups other than FlexiTeam, including the two other teams I briefly studied, success as a virtual team may not be a central concern in their everyday working lives. For example, the team in the finance department were far more preoccupied with maintaining an identity as competent management accountants than with stressing their status as an exemplary virtual team. Taking the unique context of FlexiTeam into account involves recognising that the power of the teleworking consultancy discourse has its limits within even within TechnoCo.

Beyond the virtual teams in TechnoCo, the power of the discourse again largely depends on its pertinence to the identity negotiations of the team in the context of their local social relations. The extent to which the discourse is taken up is reliant on local interpretations regarding the significance of being a 'best practice' virtual team, and always already competes with the various other discourses operating

within the organisational context of the team in question. Recognition of the importance of context means that the processes of subjective constitution described within FlexiTeam may not be found to such extent in other virtual teams. Indeed, some may not identify with the term 'virtual' or even the term 'team'. In other words, the power of the teleworking consultancy discourse observed in FlexiTeam may well be limited in other virtual teams who are not teleworking consultants. It is important to take this into account when considering the wider implications of the findings of this particular study.

It is also important to take into consideration the limited impacts of this study on the future of teleworking. 'Critical' does not mean 'negative' and the critical approach of this study does not imply that teleworking is detrimental for organisations or society as a whole. The critical approach simply seeks to ask certain questions that are omitted from the public accounts of teleworking. These public accounts are often instrumentally-rational in their approach, and are also often constructed by actors with a particular interest in teleworking (such as FlexiTeam). Yet these public accounts continue to constitute the dominant voice representing teleworking. This critical thesis is therefore likely to have limited impact on the future trajectory of teleworking discourse, at least within work organisations and the media.

It is anticipated that teleworking will continue to increase in prevalence and prominence on the political and organisational agenda. Regarding the former, in the UK, teleworking remains an important part of the Government's aim to make the country a leading 'Information Society', and deliver their commitment to 'work-life balance'. For example, Patricia Hewitt, then Minister for Small Business and E-commerce, expressed her support and commitment to teleworking at the

Telework 2000 conference in London, September 2000³⁵, where I also first made contact with FlexiTeam. The Department of Trade and Industry also launched their 'work-life balance' project in June 2000, including over ten million pounds of funding for organisations to develop work-life balance initiatives³⁶, of which FlexiTeam were involved in bidding for work.

Related to this political agenda, an increasing number of organisations are developing an interest in teleworking, or formalising their more ad-hoc flexible working practices. The 'business imperatives' to implement teleworking, as publicised and promoted by groups such as FlexiTeam (see section 1.1.3), are highly compelling. These include proactive moves to improve recruitment and retention of staff, for example, and reactive moves to government legislation, for example. These were expressed by a potential client of FlexiTeam I visited with team member Barry as 'carrots' and 'sticks' – precisely the reasons why they had called in FlexiTeam to discuss teleworking.

This thesis has attempted to show the importance of context for constructing the local experience of teleworking. FlexiTeam's experience of teleworking was different to the finance and government teams I studied because, among other things, FlexiTeam are teleworking consultants. This calls into question the usefulness of the term 'teleworking' itself. The Government is keen to promote teleworking, in part perhaps due to its association with the alluring concepts of 'knowledge work' and the 'Information Society'. Indeed, this is the very discourse promulgated by FlexiTeam. It is assumed that teleworking has certain 'impacts' upon society, and the role of social science is therefore to elucidate the various

³⁵ For the text of this speech, see <http://www.accounts-software-services.co.uk/dti/hewitt130900.html>

³⁶ For more details of the DTI Work-Life Balance campaign, see <http://www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance/>

'benefits' and 'challenges' of teleworking in order for the phenomenon to be better implemented.

This conceptualisation is at odds with the theorisation developed in this thesis. The universal category 'teleworking' does not differentiate between different experiences of work under this label, experiences shaped by the context in which it is implemented. Those engaged in low-paid, intensive data entry work at home may find it hard to identify with the story presented in this thesis. Unions would no doubt offer a different account of what teleworking 'is' and 'does' to those accounts generated by FlexiTeam and government bodies.

Indeed, we have seen that the very list of 'benefits' supposedly derived from teleworking presented by FlexiTeam themselves at conferences (see section 1.1.3) were not deterministically realised within the team. The discourse itself was not consistent, homogenous and complete. FlexiTeam interpreted and negotiated the meaning of teleworking, often placing 'delighting the customer' above 'work-life balance' in their hierarchy of values (as discussed in section 5.2.2). Thus, teleworking does not deterministically generate certain 'benefits'.

The point is that conceptualising teleworking in terms of essential characteristics, causes and effects does not help to appreciate the contextual nature of its implementation and interpretation. What is more interesting is to ask how what teleworking 'is' and 'does' is constructed, the processes through which actors are convinced that teleworking offers the 'solution' to their 'problems', what 'interests' are constructed, furthered and endangered in implementing teleworking, and how certain power relations are eroded and constructed in the process of

implementing teleworking. This study hopes to have generated some insight into precisely these questions.

Notwithstanding, there is reason to believe that the significance accorded to teleworking may diminish in the near future. This is not to suggest that the practice of teleworking may become less prevalent, but that the need to label these practices 'telework' - and thereby differentiate such practices as distinctively different (and furthermore *problematic*) forms of work - may lose its appeal. This argument comes from a surprising source: the US telecommuting author and consultant Gil Gordon. Gordon (2000) argues that as increasing numbers of workers undertake forms of flexible working it may become a more accepted and taken-for-granted part of organisational life. As more and more work is performed in flexible ICT-enabled ways, teleworking may be regarded as 'business as usual' rather than challenging and problematic. As a result, Gordon argues, the need to distinguish 'telework' from simply 'work' may diminish, in a similar way to which the term 'horseless carriage' became an outdated and increasingly redundant way of describing the automobile.

In developing this argument, there are implications for both academic research and practitioner consultancy. The participants of this research, and to a certain extent this research itself, relies upon a taken-for-granted premise that teleworking is a qualitatively different and potentially problematic form of work. This assumption is taken as the basis of a justification of the need for academic research in the case of the research proposal I constructed, and justification of the need to provide consultancy services in the case of FlexiTeam. Indeed, this assumption may well have been a major reason underlying the participants'

motivation to take part in my study – in the hope that research will render teleworking more ‘knowable’ and ‘manageable’.

It is therefore important to be reflexive about the role of this thesis, and the subjects of this thesis (FlexiTeam), in constructing the very ‘field of enquiry’ they seek to address. Writing a thesis on the subject, and offering consultancy services on the subject, implicated both the researcher and FlexiTeam in a form of *reification* of the concept ‘teleworking’. To anticipate the decline of teleworking as a term may appear trivial (what is in a name?), but it may have less than trivial implications for the future of academic and practitioner research in the field. So long as ‘teleworking’ remains seen as a more or less ‘new’ and ‘problematic’ form of work organisation, academic research and commercial consultancy retains its ‘object’ of study.

7.2.2 The Findings in Relation to the Role of Technology in Organisations

The findings with regard to my first research question, presented in Chapter 4, could be seen, among other things, to explore the role of technology in organisations. There exists a growing body of literature that aims to go beyond objectivist, essentialist and rationalist accounts of technology and explore sociological understandings of the construction of technological artefacts and systems. My study also takes onboard these epistemological concerns by exploring the social processes through which teleworking was achieved. My ethnography attempted to go beyond the public accounts (generated by actors such as FlexiTeam themselves) that portray teleworking as effortless and flexible; enabled and supported by new technology.

Nevertheless, the focus of this research was on the experience of (tele-) work for the subjects of the research. The focus was less on the construction of the technological artefact, of which many are employed in virtual teams, and more on the construction of the experience of work for those involved. One study that proved insightful for informing this analysis was the work of Schwartz, Nardi and Whittaker (1999) detailed in the literature review (section 2.4.2). The authors argued that public accounts of virtual work hide or 'delete' the costs and burdens of virtualisation, which are pushed onto individuals. The findings of this research concur with the conclusions of these authors. I have argued that social processes, in particular the 'hidden' labour and discipline on the part of team members, play a significant role in making teleworking 'work'.

This constitutes an important critique of accounts that attribute the rise of teleworking to the 'onward march' of technology and the inevitable (and desirable) arrival of the 'Information Society' (as described in section 1.1). It also criticises those who attribute the 'success' of teleworking to the instrumentally rational application of new management practices and techniques (as described in section 2.1). These accounts both hide or 'delete' the forms of labour and discipline implied on the part of teleworkers in order to sustain the new working arrangement. In this respect, this thesis offers a critique of deterministic accounts of technology and contributes to the growing body of anti-deterministic studies of technology.

It was suggested that teleworking might be better understood as a precarious accomplishment that requires the *subjective commitment* of team members in order to maintain the arrangement. It is on these issues of subjectivity and

commitment that my research extends and progresses the argument made by Schwartz, Nardi and Whittaker (1999). These authors offer a great *breadth* of analysis by studying a large number of virtual workers across a range of work contexts, including self-employment and contracting. My analysis aims to add greater *depth* to our understanding of virtual work by exploring how workers' commitment to this 'hidden work' might be understood.

Why are virtual workers committed to 'making it work'? The answer to this question appears to depend on social context. Employees may be committed to their team-mates, or a charismatic leader, or concerned to maintain their employment fearing redundancy, or have dependents to care for in the home. For self-employed teleworkers, their identity as an 'entrepreneur' or 'portfolio worker' might be at stake. Alternatively, virtual team members may *not* be that committed to making virtual teamwork 'work'. For example, the finance team I briefly studied were far more concerned about meeting the deadline for their monthly financial report than with perfecting their virtual teamwork processes. Indeed, some may not even be identified with being a 'virtual team member', preferring instead to identify themselves with a professional or occupational group.

Nevertheless, in the case of FlexiTeam, making virtual teamwork 'work' did appear to be a central concern, in no small part due to their role as teleworking consultants. The contribution of this thesis lies in its additional analysis of the social processes through which the subjective commitment of FlexiTeam members was constructed, presented in Chapter 5. This was explored in relation to FlexiTeam's social relationships at work. The contribution of this analysis to the field of critical studies of organisations is discussed in the next section.

7.2.3 The Findings in Relation to Critical Studies of Organisations

Although this thesis is about virtual teamwork, it is hoped that the findings are of relevance to scholars more broadly interested in subjectivity and discourse in organisations. It must be made clear at this point that this thesis does not claim any form of scientific generalisation of my findings to other contexts. However, it is anticipated that researchers interested in processes of identity construction in other change programs (such as TQM, BPR, teamwork and so on) may find the *theoretical* insights of this research of interest. It is therefore hoped that the findings of this study will advance the theoretical debate on subjectivity and discourse in organisations. This in turn may shape the agenda of future research, as the findings of this study might be used to sensitise researchers to the complexity and indeterminacy of the subjectivity/discourse relationship. This section aims to compare and contrast my findings with the literature presented in the literature review. The discussion aims to elucidate and evaluate the original contribution made by my study to the field of critical studies of work and organisations.

The findings of this research support the growing body of literature that critically questions the notion of subjectivity as an essential, autonomous self which employees simply 'bring to' work, separated from the social relations of the workplace. This supports the position put forward by O'Doherty and Willmott (2000) in their critique of Sosteric's ethnographic study, as described in the literature review (section 2.4). As O'Doherty and Willmott (2000) argue, employees do not simply express an essential, autonomous, authentic self at work. Rather, employees' sense of self-identity is actively negotiated in the

context of social relationships at work, in the case of Sosteric's analysis with colleagues, customers and management.

Similarly, Chapter 5 explored the local social relations through which FlexiTeam members' work-based identity³⁷ was constituted. Through their everyday identity negotiations with their clients, with TechnoCo and within the team, team members strove to construct and maintain their identity as an 'exemplary, profitable team player'. In other words, team members' subjectivity was actively 'made up', or discursively constituted, through their identity negotiations in their local social context. This concurs with O'Doherty and Willmott (2000: 121), who argue:

"...self-identity is in a continuous process of reflection, (re)formation, and work, and not something that is a given, or self-evident and inviolable, possession of 'individuals'."

In the case of FlexiTeam, team members' relationship with clients, TechnoCo and within the team was productive of a particular form of subjectivity. Being an 'exemplary, profitable, team player' did not repress, deny or obscure team members' essential autonomous self. However, recognising that individuals are not separate from the social world, since their subjectivity is constructed through social interaction, does not render the subject a passive recipient of this process.

"Subjectivity, then, is not something that is done to individuals; they participate in the constitution of their own subjectivity as they reflect on, and reproduce the social world."

(Knights and McCabe, 2000: 424)

³⁷ This study explicitly focuses on the forms of *work-based* self-identity constructed by team members. My interest was in how members see themselves at work, in particular as 'teleworkers'. As such this thesis does not claim to have examined team members' non-work based identities, such as the identities constructed in the home domain. Indeed, the forms of self-identity presented by participants were clearly informed by the context of interaction, which included the influence of my research focus on work-related matters.

As described in Chapter 5, the team members actively negotiated their subjectivity in the context of the social relationships they experience in their everyday lives. The findings of this study therefore support a particular theorisation of discourse and subjectivity. Discourse is not seen as an abstract phenomenon, divorced from everyday life, or as du Gay (2000) terms it: 'waiting in the wings'. The notion that discourse arrives 'fully formed', bringing with it 'a priori' subject positions (Hall, 1996), is therefore criticised by the findings of this study.

FlexiTeam were active in constructing the meaning of being a 'good virtual team member' for both themselves and others (in their consultancy advice to their clients and their internal role within TechnoCo). This process was not pre-defined and closed off – it was variably constructed in the particular context of action. The meaning of being a 'good virtual team member' was also susceptible to change over time as FlexiTeam extended and 'perfected' their consultancy tools and techniques. Furthermore, the theorisation of subjectivity developed in this thesis does not represent the disciplinary power of the consultancy discourse as simply negative and constraining; repressive of team members' autonomous 'real' self. Being a good virtual team member was productive of a particular form of self-identity. The consultancy discourse was also productive of knowledge and thereby opened up new discursive spaces for action, for example the ability to talk openly about 'work-life balance'.

This theorisation of power, discourse and subjectivity supports the critical literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In particular, section 2.7 developed a more sophisticated view of power, whereby power was viewed as relational as opposed to a necessarily oppressive force held by some and exercised over and against

others. My analysis therefore concurs with Knights and Morgan (1991) who argue that power is not only constraining and repressive but also enabling and productive of subjectivity. For FlexiTeam members, an identity as an 'exemplary, profitable, team-player' was an attractive, alluring concept capable of offering them a sense of worth, legitimacy and meaning. On a theoretical level, therefore, it is important to recognise the positive and productive aspects of discourse. In addition, it is important to recognise that critics who focus on the pressures and intensification of new workplace cultures can themselves be criticised for marginalizing the positive aspects of these new environments (Ezzy, 2001).

This concern was addressed in my study where I examined the positive aspects of FlexiTeam's 'work-life balance' discourse, for example (section 5.2.5). I found it liberating and refreshing that team members were able to talk about prioritising non-work aspects of their lives without being criticised for failing to put the company first. The attractions of being in a 'team' are obvious. As described in the Introduction (section 1.2), being a 'team player' and 'making the team' are highly positive concepts that help to maintain the appeal of teamwork. I experienced a positive sense of belonging and inclusion when the team referred to me as 'one of the team', and invited me to their social events such as Eric's leaving do and their end of year go-karting event. In fact, the concept of teleworking can also be productive of a very positive form of identity. Teleworking is associated with many alluring identity concepts such as 'trusted', 'nomadic knowledge worker', 'flexible', 'balanced', 'high-tech' and so on. These identity concepts are certainly more attractive than what their opposites imply: 'controlled', 'static', 'routine', 'inflexible', 'sedentary' and so on.

However, reflecting on the tone of this thesis, it is clear that my story can also be criticised (as per the critique by Ezzy (2001) detailed above) for focussing too heavily on the negative, restraining aspects of the teleworking consultancy discourse. This is a tendency I found hard to curtail, both in the field and during writing-up. For example, although I felt a sense of belonging and security from being considered 'one of the team', and thoroughly enjoyed go-karting with the team, concomitant with this I perceived an expectation that I be seen to contribute to the team (see for example the conversation with Martin in section 5.4). I also focussed heavily on this obligation felt by team members to 'go the extra mile' for the team in my discussion about the intra-team relationship (section 5.4).

I do not wish to unfairly marginalize the positive stories about teleworking I gathered during my fieldwork. Indeed, the term 'critical' used in this thesis does *not* refer to concentrating, for the sake of it, on the negative aspects of a phenomenon. Yet, after all, FlexiTeam and other such groups with interests in the subject already do a very good job of proliferating positive stories of teleworking and virtual teamwork in the press, in trade journals and at conferences. The aim is therefore not to reproduce the world-view of the participants, but to critically re-interpret their culture.

This discussion shall now examine the findings regarding the three specific social relationships (clients, organisation, team) described in Chapter 5 in relation to the arguments presented in the literature review.

Discussion: The Team-Employer Relationship

FlexiTeam's relationship with their employing organisation - TechnoCo – appears to resonate with other literature in the field of critical studies of organisations. In particular, the work of Deetz (1998) is relevant to the findings of this study because the focus was similarly on the subjectivity of 'knowledge-intensive' workers and specifically 'consultants'.

The organisation studied by Deetz (1998) is particularly interesting since it had recently undergone a restructuring program that resulted in the re-conceptualisation of the group in question around the 'consultancy concept', akin to FlexiTeam. This involved moving away from being bureaucratically funded by the corporate budget, towards the market-driven principles of consultancy. Being a 'consultancy' involved being responsible for 'selling' their services to the organisation and being held accountable as a profit centre.

Deetz (1998) describes the effects of this change on the subjectivity of the consultancy groups' employees. Employees perceived a greater ownership and loyalty to 'their company' and increased control and autonomy over their work. The other side to this new identity was that the potential self-identity costs of 'their company' failing were now much higher. Considerable investment was placed in being defined as 'good' by others, from which employees also derived financial gains. Rather than labour being seen as a 'means' towards the self as an 'end', the self became a means through which to generate money for the firm. Employees were not directly controlled by management, but instead subjected themselves to 'self-surveillance'. For example, employees would often under-report the amount of time worked at client sites. Employees responded to the market-driven consultancy concept with both fear *and* loyalty; a process labelled by Deetz as 'anxiety-driven enthusiastic play acting'.

In all these respects, similarities emerge with the data presented on the relationship between FlexiTeam and their employing organisation. FlexiTeam enjoyed a privileged status and substantial reward package, which brought with it a simultaneous anxiety regarding their accountability to financial targets and the legitimacy of their status. Team members exhibited identification with 'their business' and acted as 'defenders', 'protectors' and 'promoters' of their team. Team members appeared to subject themselves to 'self-surveillance'. They also under-reported the amount of travelling they undertook to visit clients, demarcating this as 'in their own time' and unpaid. Team members were both loyal and committed to their team, but also feared for its future. FlexiTeam appeared acutely aware of the precariousness of their organisational identity as their 'value' was rationalised along market principles. As Mulholland (1998) argues, mechanisms such as financial controls can offer a 'mythical' sense of autonomy while facilitating a greater degree of control over managers.

Similarities with the findings of this research also emerge with respect to the work of du Gay (1996, 1996a, 2000) on entrepreneurialism and 'enterprise discourse'. Enterprise discourse refers not only to the cultural reconstruction of *organisations* (including the public sector) along market principles of 'enterprise' and the 'sovereign consumer', but crucially also the reconstruction of the identities of *individuals* as 'enterprising subjects' – calculating, autonomous, responsible, self-regulating individuals (du Gay, 1996). Organisations increasingly attempt to "simulate conditions in which employees of large organizations are made to act a bit more like they were in business for themselves" (du Gay, 2000: 174). In other words, the employee is reconstituted as "an entrepreneur of the self" (du Gay, 1996: 72).

du Gay's thesis resonates strongly with the data presented in section 5.3. FlexiTeam members described how they experienced a personal responsibility to generate profit and be recognised within the organisation as 'successful'. In many respects, team members' sense of self-worth appeared to be intimately bound up with their perceived success as 'entrepreneurs'. Indeed, Eric sees himself as an 'entrepreneur' within TechnoCo, selling the concept of teleworking consultancy to senior management. This 'ownership' seemed to make team members feel all the more responsible for making FlexiTeam a success.

However, the particular organisational situation of FlexiTeam is also where this thesis departs from the work of du Gay and many other theorists of organisational change. The history of FlexiTeam (section 4.1) described the particular process through which the original members of the team moved from being involved in the internal telework program to 'selling' the very idea of an external consultancy group to senior management. In this sense, FlexiTeam were not subject to any 'conspiracy to control'. The concept of empowerment was in this case extended from not only autonomy over the job they happen to perform, but also the jurisdiction to create the very nature job they will perform. FlexiTeam themselves created the teleworking consultancy discourse they sell to clients, and strive to practice themselves. The discourse to which they are subject was therefore not formulated *for* them – it was formulated *by* them.

This stands in contrast to the existing literature that typically focuses on the subjective experiences of workers subjected to changes imposed by senior management. This may be a (intended or unintended) consequence of the legacy of orthodox labour process theory, with its focus on the structural antagonism

between capital (or the agents of capitalism) and workers. Indeed, the findings of this study do not rest easily with the tenets of traditional labour process theory.

Taylor (1998: 99) outlines what he sees as the four central tenets of labour process theory. With each tenet, it is unclear how FlexiTeam could be best understood in this theory. Are FlexiTeam exploited or the exploiters? Should they be considered labour or (representatives of) capital? Are FlexiTeam subject to a logic of accumulation, or active in furthering this logic themselves? Or both? Where does the 'control imperative' come from, if one exists at all? Is there a 'structured antagonism' at work? If so, where is it evidenced?

These questions could well be problematic for the category 'management' within any industry. Yet the case of FlexiTeam is particularly problematic with regard to labour process theory. FlexiTeam do not perform a job devised by management, nor are they subject to a discourse created by senior management and imposed 'from above'. Eric proactively 'sold' the idea of their job to senior management, and the team themselves have actively created the discourse they sell to clients. It therefore seems that the understanding derived from studies of 'top-down' cultural control, or as du Gay (1996) terms it, 'labelling from above', may be inadequate for understanding the more complex situation of FlexiTeam.

The existing literature may be criticised specifically for failing to consider adequately the subjectivity of those who are active in the production the discourse in question. For example, du Gay (1996) discusses in detail the public intentions of those senior managers active in introducing the enterprise discourse, evidenced for instance in strategy documents, which he labels the 'vector from above'. However, du Gay does not extend his analysis to consider

the subjective relationship these same managers have with regard to the discourse they are involved in producing. Although this may be more a result of the practical barriers often involved in gaining access than a theoretical oversight (see section 2.5), this is typical of the 'top-down' approach employed in the studies of Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering and Teamwork discussed in the literature review (section 2.4.3 onwards).

In this respect, this thesis may constitute an important original contribution to the processes of subjective control in organisations. It develops an understanding of the reflexive processes of subjective constitution ongoing within those managers who produce the very same discourse to which they are also subject. The implications of FlexiTeam's relationship with clients and the reflexive nature of their identity are discussed in more detail later.

Discussion: The Intra-Team Relationship

A number of studies on teamwork that question the notion of top-down managerial control are also relevant here. This literature similarly focuses on processes of normative control that may arise from dynamics 'within' as well as 'without'. In particular, authors such as Barker (1999) and Sewell (1998) have argued that processes of normative control arising *within teams* have significant implications for subjectivity at work (see literature review, section 2.4). These authors argue that although teamwork appears to involve management conceding and devolving control, teamwork may actually promote managerial control, albeit in less obtrusive and more insidious forms such as peer surveillance.

My study involves a different empirical situation to these authors because FlexiTeam are a self-defined 'team', as opposed to being part of a company-wide change toward self-directed teams. Nevertheless, the findings of my study appear to have many similarities to the findings of these authors. The social relationships within the team (see section 5.3) appeared to play a significant role in the generation of self-discipline on the part of team members.

My findings helped to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the self-disciplined behaviour of team members as compared to the instrumentally rational theories about the target system derived from the prescriptive management literature (see section 2.1.4). The concepts of trust, visibility, expertise, adding value and 'going the extra mile' were seen to have a normalising effect on team members' subjectivity at work. The peer surveillance of other team members appeared to constitute a less obtrusive but more powerful and complete form of control as compared to bureaucratic methods of control such as the target system. This finding supports the work of the authors discussed in the literature review, section 2.4. These authors described the disciplinary effects of being subject to constant scrutiny by peers within a team, or as Barker (1999) terms it, being under "the eye of the norm".

The data regarding the intra-team relationship also offers an interesting twist on the concept of 'peer surveillance' found in the literature. Barker (1999) and Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) both refer to 'visibility' as crucial in the operation of peer surveillance. Here, employees physically survey their team-mates to identify and correct deviance from the norms of behaviour they have established. On the other hand, in FlexiTeam the issue is not so much visibility as *invisibility*. Team members are teleworkers who rarely see one another face-to-face. Therefore the

problem that they perceive is not so much being constantly surveyed for *deviance*, but having few opportunities for the performance of being *identified* with the norms of the team. Team members are advised to constantly work at promoting themselves through various media, in order that they avoid becoming 'out of sight, out of mind'. In spite of this subtle difference, my analysis shares with these authors an emphasis on the issue of disciplinary power. The self-disciplinary consequences of *invisibility* in FlexiTeam appeared to operate in a similar fashion to the *visibility* described by Barker (1999) and Sewell (1998).

However, where my thesis departs from these authors is on the issue of the *power* attributed to normative control within teams. For example, Barker (1999) argued that resistance to the normative control of the team was almost futile. Barker argues that demonstrating identification was a condition of membership and lack of identification did not go unchallenged by other team members. He describes how those deviating from the norm would be subject to trial by a jury of peers, who had the power to hire and fire team members. The result was that few team members wanted to risk challenging the legitimate authority of the team's moral order.

My thesis departs from these arguments by Barker where it considers the limits, ambiguities and points of contestation to the normalisation of team members' subjectivity. Although I may not be able to categorise my data in terms of 'resistance' per se, the data presented in Chapter 6 suggests forms of deviation, dissatisfaction, discontent and disregard of the discourses within FlexiTeam. Although I found no examples of direct challenge to the moral order of the teleworking consultancy discourse, the examples described suggested that team

members' identification with the discourse was not necessarily straightforward and complete. These conclusions are discussed in more detail below.

My thesis also offers a more sophisticated understanding of virtual teams by not only considering dynamics within the team, but extending my analysis to some of the other social relationships experienced by FlexiTeam in their everyday work lives. In addition to dynamics within the team (5.4), my analysis examined the processes of identity negotiation occurring within the team's relationship with TechnoCo (5.2) and with their clients (5.3). Focussing on the intra-team dynamics alone may have resulted in a somewhat more limited understanding of team members' work lives. Indeed, it is arguably the inter-relationship and forms of reinforcement, tension and contradiction between these multiple forms of accountability that offers the greatest analytical purchase on team members' experience at work.

My work also sought to advance the critical literature on teamwork by developing a synthesis with another body of literature on 'individualisation' (see section 2.8). It appears contradictory to propose that teamwork, with its connotations of interdependence and mutual support, should result in team members being 'separated off' from one another and held responsible for their own actions. Yet section 5.4 described how FlexiTeam placed emphasis on individuals maintaining their own *visibility* in order to avoid the problem of being 'out of sight, out of mind' in the virtual team. Team members took onboard the responsibility of 'blowing their own trumpet' - demonstrating the 'added value' and 'unique expertise' they brought to the team. By doing so, team members were performing being a 'team player' and showing they were putting the team 'first'.

The 'visibility' concept appeared to have distinct *individualising* social consequences. Team members not only took onboard the workload associated with promoting themselves, but also shouldered the responsibility for the success or otherwise of their self-promotion efforts. Any dissatisfaction with status and reward was not attributed to virtual teamwork but instead referred back to the individual. The proposed 'solution' was also individualised: team members were advised to work harder at maintaining visibility. Collective solutions, such as altering the performance evaluation system for virtual teams, were rejected in favour of individualised solutions.

This finding strongly resonates with the literature on individualisation, such as Knights and Morgan's (1991a) study of insurance salespeople and du Gay's (1996) study of enterprise discourse in the retail sector (see section 2.8). In both these studies employees were regarded as autonomous and responsible individuals. Employees were thereby held accountable for their own actions and situation. Similarly, in the case of FlexiTeam, team members were referred back to themselves when questions of the ethics and efficacy of virtual teamwork arose. The teleworking consultancy discourse therefore appears to be part of a wider story about the individualising effects of new forms of workplace organisation.

Discussion: The Team-Client Relationship

The findings regarding the team-client relationship could be said to constitute the original contribution of my research. This is because FlexiTeam are unique in their dual role in both practicing and selling teleworking. In other words, FlexiTeam produce the very same discourse they also consume. This differs from

the studies outlined in the literature review, which focussed on 'top-down' examples of organisational change, where change is devised by senior management and imposed upon employees.

There exists a growing body of literature regarding managerial subjectivity and the managerial labour process (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Watson, 1994; du Gay, Salaman and Rees, 1996), and some insightful studies of consultants and the consultancy process (see for example Sturdy, 1997). However, to date there exists a lack of research into how managerial groups themselves subjectively experience the discourses they are involved in propagating. This is an interesting dynamic that has yet to be explored fully, but which offers potentially significant insight into the discourse/subjectivity relationship.

In the studies just cited, the discourse in question came from 'outside' the group in question. Research has yet to consider the forms of subjectivity generated by the reflexivity inherent in the production/consumption dynamic. My study directly addresses this lack of research and attempts to develop an understanding of subjectivity in cases of control from 'within'. FlexiTeam were not subject to a 'conspiracy to control' in the traditional sense. FlexiTeam were themselves the 'change agents' within TechnoCo's teleworking program, and are now acting as 'change agents' within client organisations.

The forms of normative control that I observed in FlexiTeam could be understood with reference to their relationship with their clients. The legitimacy of the team in the eyes of the client involved constructing an identity as 'embodiments' and 'exemplars' of 'best practice' virtual teamwork. It was argued that the performance of being an 'exemplary' team generated a reflexive dynamic for

team members' subjectivity. Team members' relationship to the discourse appeared to be far more intimate, immediate and insidious as a result of being engaged in personally 'preaching' the discourse to clients on a daily basis. In order to maintain a legitimate identity with clients, team members strove to 'practice what they preach', generating the disciplinary power of the teleworking consultancy discourse within the team.

To be clear, the term 'reflexive' is not to be regarded as referring to an essential capacity of humans. As Knights and McCabe (2000: 425) argue, "such self-reflection is itself partly a result of the humanistic demand for individual accountability and responsibility." Like these authors, reflexivity is referred to in this thesis as developed through our participation in the social world³⁸. Thus, in certain social contexts, such as a meeting with a client or an interview with a researcher, team members were accountable in terms of reflecting on their experiences.

FlexiTeam are not the only group of workers who may experience this reflexive relationship between production and consumption. Religious evangelists and politicians are two other occupational roles in which incumbents must strive to 'practice what they preach' in order to maintain a legitimate identity. Similar processes of reflexive self-monitoring may well be observed in these professional groups, of course acknowledging the ambiguity, ambivalence, subversion and contradiction that may also be observed within these occupations.

In a broader sense, the findings of this research may help develop our understanding of managerial subjectivity, where management are engaged in the

production and consumption of discourses of organisational change. Although this thesis focuses on teleworking discourse in particular, it is hoped that the insights from my study help towards building a theoretical understanding of subjectivity in relation to this production/consumption dynamic. It is anticipated that the development of this theory will aid in the understanding of other instances of organisational change, just as this thesis has drawn insight in the literature review from cases of organisational change such as TQM, BPR and teamwork.

However, my thesis also developed a more sophisticated theory of subjectivity than a simple account of the power of the reflexive dynamic of production/consumption in reinforcing normative control. Chapter 6 described how the subjectivity of FlexiTeam members was far more complex and ambiguous than simply being determined by the teleworking consultancy discourse. Chapter 6 therefore constitutes a further theoretical contribution of this thesis. This contribution shall be discussed next.

Discussion: Totalised Subjects?

The following discussion the discourse/subjectivity relationship shall draw on Fornier and Grey's (1999) critique of du Gay's work on enterprise culture, as discussed earlier (see literature review section 2.6). As a reminder, Fornier and Grey criticise du Gay along three dimensions: 'too much', 'too little' and 'too often'. To be clear, du Gay (2000) has responded to these criticisms and effectively defended his work through a clarification of the meaning of his analysis. Nevertheless, these three criticisms remain sound reminders to researchers of subjectivity in organisations. The criticisms are therefore also

³⁸ For example, children are socialised into reflexively self-monitoring their behaviour to generate conduct

meaningful and relevant to my own work. This section discusses where my own work stands in relation to these three dimensions and how my analysis contributes to the field.

Chapter 5 presented a picture of team members as somewhat 'totalised' by the discourses to which they were subject, as reinforced by their relationships with clients, TechnoCo and within the team. It could therefore be argued that chapter 5 was guilty of claiming 'too much' for the teleworking consultancy discourse. This represents team members as almost passive subjects, determined by the discourse to which they are subject. This is an unsophisticated and incomplete understanding of subjectivity because fails to theorise adequately the relationship between self and discourse.

Fornier and Grey (1999) urge the researcher to avoid the tendency to allow 'too little' space for resistance in their analysis. As Kondo (1990: 114-5) concludes, "no regime of truth is completely encompassing", pointing to the complexity and diversity of the reactions she observed. Similarly, Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 624) warn against

"exaggerating the fragility and vulnerability of subjects to the discourses through and within which they are allegedly constituted."

As Ezzy (1997) suggests, employees are not a passive product of power and a mere reflection of discourse. What is needed therefore, according to Newton (1998), is a theory of subjectivity that is grounded in local histories and power relations and that is sensitive to variation in discursive constitution. Chapter 6 attempts to develop precisely this theory of subjectivity.

The literature on resistance in organisations is important for examining the relational nature of power and for highlighting subjectivity as an important medium and outcome of power relationships (see section 2.7). However, the term 'resistance', as discussed in the literature review, did not appear to be appropriate for categorising the practices I observed in FlexiTeam. The examples described in Chapter 6 were highly a-political and individualised responses. These responses could not therefore be considered 'resistance', or even 'voice', in the commonly understood sense of the terms. Like Kondo (1990: 219), I found that the contradictions, multiplicities and variations in meaning could not be adequately accounted for using the "neat, closed, monolithic, internally coherent" concept of 'resistance'.

Thus, although examples of overt resistance were not observed in my study, this did not lead to the conclusion that team members' subjectivity was colonised in a 'total' fashion. As the studies by Knights and McCabe (1998a; 2000a) and Casey (1995) suggested (see section 2.7), there may exist a variety of subjective responses to organisational discourses. Similarly, as du Gay (2000) argues in response to the criticisms of Fournier and Grey (1999), forms of critical reaction may well be formed in response to attempts to 'manage culture' that cannot sensibly be described as resistance, with different or no forms of political implications. The role of the analyst is thus to delineate and explore these various subjective responses.

Chapter 6 addressed this concern by developing alternative analytical concepts such as discontent, disregard, irony, ambiguity, ambivalence, cynicism, contradiction and instrumental commitment to make sense of the range of

subjective responses I observed. I sought to illustrate how subjectivity, even in the case of a team who produced the discourse to which they are subject, is far more ambiguous, complex and uncertain than any 'totalising' theory presupposes. The evidence about the power of the teleworking consultancy discourse was at best inconclusive.

The indeterminacy of the power of organisational discourse is increasingly being recognised within the literature. Even in a collection criticised by O'Doherty and Willmott (2001) for rehearsing banal, totalising conceptions of power, McKinlay and Taylor (1998) found that, in spite of the intentions of management, advanced Human Resource practices had *not* enabled management to govern the soul of employees. As Taylor (1998) argues, employees may accept organisational discourses 'pragmatically' rather than 'normatively'. He furthermore suggests that

"... employee internalisation of attempted normative and discursive controls must not be assumed *even when worker behaviour may indicate consent.*"

(Taylor, 1998: 100 emphasis in original)

Similarly, Knights and McCabe (1999) warn that there is a danger in assuming that worker compliance implies colonised subjectivity, just as a conforming prisoner may not necessarily identify with the values of the guards or decline the chance of escape. This resonates with the concept of instrumental commitment developed in Chapter 6. This analytical concept helped to make sense of the data which suggested that team members may simultaneously perform identification with the discourse, while exhibiting a more instrumental relationship to the discourse, for example by applying for another job. Indeed, members of FlexiTeam consistently performed public behaviour that complied with the 'best practice' they sell in their consultancy work. Nevertheless, in private, Member1

and Member2 expressed a sense of dissatisfaction, discontent and cynicism regarding the discourse. Their subjectivity was certainly not colonised in any simplistic sense and was characterised more by a complex ambiguity and ambivalence. However, this dissatisfaction was not translated into forms of resistance or voice. These team members sought private, individual solutions to their complaints.

To be clear, in reproducing this data I am not claiming that it represents team members' 'true attitudes' regarding their situation. My data does not aim to conclusively demonstrate whether team members 'are' or 'are not' identified with the discourse. The term 'identity performance' does not imply that there exists some 'real' or 'essential' identity that is expressed 'back-stage'. This notion of the 'sovereign subject' was criticised in the literature review (2.4). My thesis instead showed the complexity of subjectivity as it was negotiated in the context of local social relations. This involved forms of 'identity work' in which team members constructed forms of identity appropriate to their particular situation. Identity was therefore *situated, open and reflexive*.

For instance, Member1 and Member2's sense of dissatisfaction was expressed to me in private, as an outside researcher who was somewhat independent and possibly impartial, and may even feed back this information to their benefit. Yet in front of the team, these same team members performed a committed and identified identity. This is understandable because being critical of teleworking while selling it to clients may be a difficult aspect of their job to reconcile and rationalise. My findings therefore describe the range of possible subjective responses to a particular organisational discourse, theorised as situated and contextual performances. This constitutes a critique of those authors discussed in

the literature review (such as Peters and Waterman, 1982) who assume that it is both possible and desirable to 'manage culture' through the colonisation of employee subjectivity.

Chapter 6 employed the concept of 'career' in an attempt to make sense of the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory responses I observed. The notion of career suggested that team members carefully managed their day-to-day behaviour in order to construct a successful career in TechnoCo. Career was seen as a project of self-management. This mode of conceptualising 'career' has been well developed by Grey (1994) in his study of the accounting profession. Grey describes the multiple forms of labour and self-disciplined behaviour performed by junior accountants in order to realise their career within the firm. This appears akin to the forms of labour and self-disciplined behaviour described in this thesis in Chapter 4.

Similarly, du Gay (1996: Chapter 7) refers to career where he examines the subjective relationship experienced by employees with regard to the new 'enterprise' discourse. Senior staff in particular recognised the necessity of performing identification with the enterprise culture, not only for the continued success of the company, but also for their future career progression. In one example, the manager concerned was aware that resisting the new training program could possibly damage her long-term career prospects. Employees were aware that failure to cope with the pressures put upon them could result in dismissal. The notion of 'career' has therefore already been highlighted in *existing* analyses of the discourse/subjectivity relationship, a theory *this* analysis aims to further develop.

The concept of career was developed to stretch the temporal frame of my analysis to consider how team members make sense of their current role in terms of their wider career narratives. As Grey (1994: 481) argues, career “links past, present and future through the vector of the self”. However, Grey presents the career discourse of the accounting firms he studied as a somewhat coherent, complete and homogenous disciplinary power. For example, Grey states:

“In the attempt to go to the top, it is necessary that every facet of the employee’s life be orchestrated through the single principle of career development and success.”

(ibid: 493-4)

This may be a consequence of the level of analysis employed by Grey - the entire accounting profession – as he focuses on the features in common between the many firms he studied. This may well be a feature of the accounting profession, although closer analysis may well have revealed differences in the career performances required in different sectors, firms or even departments within firms.

Indeed, the in-depth analysis of FlexiTeam offered in this thesis reveals a more complex dynamic. Team members’ commitment to their current job was not necessarily compatible with their commitment to pursuing their longer-term career interests. A move ‘upwards’ would invariably involve a move ‘out’ of the team. The new job could well involve commitment to a distinct discourse. TechnoCo was characterised less by a single coherent discourse than many related but distinct discourses. Yet team members were also aware of the need to demonstrate commitment to their current role to the extent that this reflects positively upon themselves as ‘good employees’. This could help to make sense of the data I gathered about Member3. Member3 performed identification with

selling teleworking at a team meeting while applying for another job which involved commuting to an office. This appeared somewhat ironic and contradictory for a teleworking consultant.

This data could be interpreted through the career theory as suggesting that Member3 was not so much identified with being a teleworking consultant, but was identified with a discourse of career in which 'being committed to your job' was a central component. Member3 wanted to 'do a good job', regardless of whether we could conclude that Member3 had 'bought into' the consultancy discourse. The term 'instrumental commitment' therefore appeared more fitting for describing Member3's subjective relationship to the teleworking consultancy discourse than the term 'internalisation' or 'identification'.

To reiterate, the reader should note that this distinction between 'internalisation' and 'instrumental compliance' is not to imply that I seek to conclude which is the 'true' feeling of the team members to the discourse. I do not seek to claim to be able to distinguish team members' 'real' self from which they are alienated by the distortions of their teleworking evangelism role. This notion of the 'sovereign subject' was criticised in section 2.4. The self was conceptualised as discursively constructed in the context of social relationships. Instead, the thesis uses the concept 'instrumental commitment' as an analytical heuristic for categorising the ambiguous and often inconsistent relationship between team members and the discourse they produce. Team members' identity may be characterised as much by ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction as by coherent, consistency and singularity.

Chapter 6 further extended our understanding of the complexity of subjectivity by examining the relationship between the teleworking consultancy discourse and other (not necessarily complementary) discourses that circulated within TechnoCo. This addresses the second criticism made by Fornier and Grey (1999) that analysts tend to pay 'too little' attention to the role of alternative discourses. As Kondo (1990: 198) states, "contradictions and tensions arise as discourses ... clash or intertwine with other available discourses". Accordingly, Chapter 6 described the indeterminacy of the power of the teleworking consultancy discourse by exploring its relationship to other discourses to which FlexiTeam were subject. FlexiTeam were subject to many forms of accountability in the context of the many social relationships they negotiated. Team members were not only accountable for 'practicing what they preach', but also delivering a service to their clients and trying to win more business to sustain their position in TechnoCo. The ideal of 'putting the customer first' was also held in high regard in their moral hierarchy.

As was argued in Chapter 5 (section 5.3), FlexiTeam were accountable to their employing company for meeting financial targets from consultancy revenue. Prioritising work for clients or potential clients would be consistent with responding to this pressure to generate revenue. FlexiTeam are also accountable to clients for delivering work on time and delivering a 'good service'. Indeed, they sell teleworking to clients on the basis that enables employees to be 'closer to the customer', among others things (see section 1.1.3). This 'customer service' discourse was employed during an audio-conference (section 6.2) in order to justify and legitimise the *contradiction* of the team's very own consultancy advice about holding regular team meetings.

This example appears to demonstrate how team members' subjectivity was not totalised in any simplistic sense. Discourses must be *interpreted* rather than simply implemented. Furthermore, this interpretation process takes place in the context of other discourses. FlexiTeam were subject to often competing pressures of *accountability*. This argument supports the findings of du Gay (1996: 160-161) with regard to his study of enterprise discourse – incidentally somewhat at odds with Fournier and Grey's (1999) characterisation of his work in their second criticism described above:

“While the official discourse of enterprise tries to produce particular meanings for and forms of conduct among employees ... it cannot completely close off the processes of the production of meaning nor totally determine how particular norms will be enacted. What cannot be guaranteed in advance are the articulations that may result from the meeting and mixing of entrepreneurial discourse with already existing cultural practices – formal and informal – and the meanings and identities they constitute.”

It therefore appears that, even for a team who 'preach' the discourse, practice that is consistent with the reconfigured identity cannot be taken-for-granted. If those who *produce* the very same discourse they *consume* find decision-making ambiguous and uncertain, this calls into question the ability of management to reconfigure the identities and behaviour of workers. The conclusion from this finding suggests that it is important not to conflate the ambitions of those who do the 'labelling', as du Gay (1996) puts it, with the actual behaviour of those so 'labelled'. The challenge for scholars is therefore to delineate the precise limits, tensions and complexities of the relationship between discourse and subjectivity.

Teleworking consultancy is clearly not the only discourse through which team members constructed their sense of identity at work. Rather, it is just one of the

many discourses available in the workplace. These alternative discourses can provide other meaningful vocabularies for action without being either an expression of, or resistance to, the discourse in question (Fornier and Grey, 1999). Indeed, although this thesis deliberately focuses on the teleworking consultancy discourse, there were of course many discourses through which team members made sense of their lives that were not reproduced in this thesis. Some of these discourses were largely unrelated to the consultancy discourse: neither part of this discourse nor resistant to it. For example, the families, hobbies and community activities team members were engaged in during their spare time - which had no definite relationship to their work role - would no doubt be considered as an important part of their identity.

I certainly do not claim for teleworking consultancy discourse the “*ontological priority*” that du Gay (1996: 181 emphasis in original) claims for his enterprise discourse. The problem for FlexiTeam is precisely the contrary: the low significance accorded to teleworking is the very problem they faced in TechnoCo and now face with clients. In many cases with clients, FlexiTeam are in the position of the marginal, the resistant. My study aims to go beyond viewing discourse as fully formed and omnipotent, by showing the local struggles of power and politics behind the conception, formalisation and implementation of the teleworking consultancy discourse. FlexiTeam actively seek to prioritise teleworking both within TechnoCo in order to justify their precarious organisational status, and within clients’ business agendas in order to sell their consultancy services. This resists the conceptualisation of discourse as an abstract, ready-made formation that simply imposes itself upon employees.

However, it may be insightful at this point to undertake a reflexive analysis of the role of myself as author in constructing the 'priority' accorded to the teleworking consultancy discourse in this thesis. This relates to Fournier and Grey's (1999) third and final criticism of du Gay for being un-reflexive in his role in constructing the power and pervasiveness of the enterprise discourse in his own writings. In other words, the importance accorded to a particular discourse in academic writing may help to 'fuel the fire' of those who are involved in advocating the discourse, in this case FlexiTeam.

Similarly, my thesis plays an important role in constructing the alleged *power* of the teleworking consultancy discourse in constituting team members' subjectivity. This is not simply an objective reflection of what I found in the field. It is a product of the persuasiveness of this thesis if the reader is convinced that the teleworking consultancy discourse is coherent, prevailing and central to the team members' identity. The question of whether the participants would describe themselves as being identified with this discourse remains open to consideration. Would team members view their practices as 'labour' and 'discipline'? Would they even agree with the label 'discourse'? Even though team members have not yet been given the opportunity to address these questions, it could be anticipated that the answer would most likely be negative. This thesis is ultimately *my* view of their situation. The aim of my ethnography was not simply to reproduce the participant's 'emic' understanding of their situation (which they themselves undertake very effectively in their promotional activities), but to re-interpret their actions and interactions using 'etic' concepts and theories derived from critical literature.

The reader must also bear in mind when interpreting the conclusions drawn from this thesis that participants were not directly asked whether the discourse was important to their work, at the forefront of their minds, or central to their identity. This is a result of the time-gap between the fieldwork and analysis, during which these themes were developed. In addition, my research agenda and interview schedule must be reflexively analysed for its role in prompting narratives about their practices and perspectives that may not be seen as important outside this context.

It is possible, if not probable, that the participants did see their consultancy advice as important, but in the context of their consultancy work rather than an identity-defining concept. In other words, team members may see teleworking consultancy as what they *do*, but they may not see it as an important part of who they *are*. Even with regard to what they *do*, the power of their discourse may be questioned. FlexiTeam do indeed use narratives and personal testimonies to generate this 'exemplary' identity, which will of course be aided by the consistency of implementing their own advice, more than the active contradiction of that advice. Yet the reader must bear in mind that the clients do not actually witness the everyday activities of FlexiTeam, in order to judge whether they 'practice what they preach'. FlexiTeam's day-to-day practices may have been open to scrutiny by the researcher, but they were not transparent to the client. The reflexivity I describe is therefore, if anything, self- and peer-surveyed rather than directly scrutinised by the clients themselves. There may therefore be *limits* to the power accorded to the process of 'reflexivity' described in this thesis. To some extent it appears my thesis is guilty of according 'too much' significance to the teleworking consultancy discourse, in spite of my attempts to curtail this tendency in Chapter 6.

Notwithstanding this criticism, I generated the notion of a 'teleworking consultancy discourse' because it seemed useful in trying to understand the complex and messy data set I had collected. As Kondo (1990: 7) states, I attempted to impose order and meaning after I had left the field in a "violent attempt to recover meaning in the flux and chaos of everyday life". The danger inherent in this meaning-fixing process was that all data was thereafter interpreted through this analytical lens, precluding alternative understandings. The tendency was for data to be interpreted as either the medium or outcome of this discourse, or forms of resistance or response to the discourse.

For example, Nigel's failure to adhere to the 'best practice' of updating his voicemail (see section 6.1), along with his blatant disregard of this practice ("*I can't be arsed*"), was interpreted through this analytical lens. It was argued that Nigel's 'maverick' identity was tolerated so long as his more fundamental identification with selling teleworking and his contribution to the (financial) success of the team were deemed satisfactory. An alternative interpretation of this situation could be that the ideal of 'best practice' communication I described in the literature review (2.1) and that FlexiTeam themselves advise to clients (4.3.3) is *simply not that important* to the team. Transgression is consequently also not considered important; hence Nigel's comment went by largely unnoticed. The relationship between 'practicing' what they 'preach' may therefore be more tenuous and insignificant than I have suggested.

Another alternative interpretation of this data regarding Nigel is that the meaning of 'best practice' is not as coherent and fixed as I presented in this thesis. Indeed, FlexiTeam themselves adapt and change the form and meaning of the discourse

as they tailor their consultancy package to their clients. This could mean that updating your voicemail is not so much an established 'norm' as presented in this thesis, but more of a heuristic through which *some* team members develop meaningful practices for being a 'good' teleworker. Nigel's disregard of this practice therefore may have gone unnoticed because he had not challenged a particularly powerful social norm. He may have developed his own distinct personal methodology for being a 'good' virtual team member. The teleworking consultancy discourse may therefore be less universal, complete and fixed than I have hitherto suggested.

The reader is thus left to judge which interpretation seems to be most plausible in accounting for Nigel's situation. Alternatively, the reader may be able to generate another distinct interpretation for this data extract. Perhaps Nigel was simple in a 'bad mood' that day? Or perhaps he wanted to make some statement to a person present he was having a disagreement with? Maybe he was just simply 'joking around'? The reader is advised to be aware of and seek to retain the interpretive flexibility of the analytical process. This means treating with caution any inferences made from the one particular interpretation presented in this thesis. Indeed, reflecting on my use of the term 'research findings', this term may be inappropriate because it tends to disguise the constructed nature of the argument and thereby close off possible re-interpretations of meaning. The term 'argument' is therefore perhaps more fitting with this recognition of the constructed nature of this thesis.

A final aspect of my analysis that may benefit from a reflexive critique is the underlying assumption that FlexiTeam's engagement in producing as well as consuming the teleworking consultancy discourse necessarily *reinforces* and

strengthens its disciplinary power. This was the premise upon which the entire argument about the reflexivity of the team-client relationship was built. However, it could be argued that this involvement as producer of the discourse could generate precisely the *opposite* relationship to the discourse. Awareness of the constructed nature of the discourse, the limitations, schisms and tensions of its implementation, and the variations, nuances and contradictions of its interpretation could leave FlexiTeam members in position of being somewhat more critical and cynical about the 'truth' of the discourse. In short, the reflexivity of the production/consumption relationship could *reduce* rather than reinforce its disciplinary power. Certainly, there are implications of exactly this dynamic in Chapter 6, where Member2 expressed cynicism about the team failing to 'practice what they preach'.

The reader is again urged to critically assess the persuasiveness of the arguments I have constructed, and to develop alternative interpretations of the data I have selectively represented. Indeed, an interesting avenue for future research is to explore the possible forms and outcomes of the relationship between discourse production and consumption. This discussion is taken up in the next section (7.3). Before possible avenues for future research are discussed, the conclusions that may be tentatively drawn from this study will be briefly summarised.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my thesis has presented three main arguments. First, the taken-for-granted notion that virtual teamwork is 'effortless' and 'flexible' has been subject to critique. I have described the novel forms of 'labour' and 'discipline'

enacted by team members in order to sustain the virtual teamwork arrangement. Second, I have examined how team members' subjective commitment to these forms of labour and discipline may have been configured. My analysis considered the forms of identity that team members negotiated in their relationship with clients, their employing company TechnoCo, and other members of FlexiTeam.

The client relationship was highlighted in particular because FlexiTeam are unique in their role as 'teleworking consultants', not only practicing but also *selling* the concept of teleworking and virtual teams. In other words, FlexiTeam are active in the *production* of the very same discourse they also *consume*. It was suggested that this unique relationship could be seen to have a reflexive effect on team members' subjectivity. This reflexivity appeared to reinforce the disciplinary power of their consultancy discourse as they strove to be 'experts' and 'exemplars' of the discourse they sell. This aspect of my analysis could be seen to comprise an original contribution of my research. Scholars have normally concentrated on 'top-down' models of organisational change, where management impose change upon employees. Research has yet to sufficiently examine the dynamics of subjectivity in the case of those who formulate the discourse to which they are also subject.

In addition, my study develops a more sophisticated theory of subjectivity by examining variation in discursive constitution. The third argument suggested that the team members' subjectivity was often characterised by ambiguity, ambivalence, cynicism, contradiction and complexity. The label 'instrumental commitment' appeared to be more fitting than 'total identification' for

characterising team members' subjective relationship to their consultancy discourse. This finding appears to contribute to the development of a theory of subjectivity in organisation studies. If subjectivity is not 'totalised' within a team who produced the very same discourse to which they are also subject, this may call into question the power of organisational discourses in relation to subjectivity. This addresses a need for research identified by Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 621) who argue that subjectivity is "a significant, neglected and increasingly important modality of organisational control."

7.3 Avenues and Implications for Future Research

One obvious way in which this research could be extended and advanced would be to conduct further research into the reflexive relationship between the production and consumption of organisational discourse. In particular, in the case of FlexiTeam, this could involve a return to the field to conduct further interviews asking explicitly how team members view their dual role of both selling and practicing teleworking. This was not possible at the time of data collection because this theme was developed during data analysis after withdrawal from the field, although it went on to form a significant theoretical theme in this thesis. To explore this theme further would help to improve the robustness of my 'reflexive' theory of subjectivity.

It would also be of interest to extend this research longitudinally to explore the 'fate' of FlexiTeam after the initial pioneer Eric left the team. This would enable the theory of subjectivity to be strengthened by exploring further how team members managed being teleworking evangelists in the absence of their original

inspirational and committed leader. This change is significant because the team members recognised their reliance on Eric as the passion behind the concept of teleworking consultancy (see section 6.3). This additional research would also enable an exploration of how the teleworking consultancy discourse might change in nature and pertinence over time. For example, the issue of 'work-life balance' was being developed as a consultancy package during the end of my fieldwork, which may involve attendant 'best practice' normative implications for team members.

It would also be insightful to examine the fate of the teleworking discourse; both within clients and within TechnoCo, to explore to what extent FlexiTeam were (or were not) able to capture the identification of their internal and external clients. For while this thesis has explored in depth how the discourse exerts normative control on members of FlexiTeam, this was not the main concern of FlexiTeam. Their main concern was how to ensure clients were convinced they need 'expert' advice in the form of purchasing consultancy products, subsequently ensuring the client implemented teleworking according to their 'best practice' advice. It would therefore be insightful to explore how FlexiTeam encode their knowledge into consultancy packages and work to achieve the compliance and commitment of client organisations. It was limitations to access during my fieldwork that restricted my ability to address this issue. FlexiTeam were understandably cautious about bringing a researcher along to important client meetings. They were also verging on paranoia regarding 'giving away' their 'Intellectual Capital', that is, the content of their consultancy offering (see section 5.3.3). Nevertheless, exploring their consultancy process further could prove insightful for exploring the methods of enrolment and control they employ with clients.

For every study of the *rise* of a new managerial 'fad' such as excellence, TQM, BPR, teamwork and so on, there appears to be far less research on how discourses fall out of favour or become overshadowed by new discourses. Part of the challenge faced by FlexiTeam was precisely this: how to place teleworking high up on the organisational agenda of TechnoCo and their clients. It may therefore be insightful to study longitudinally the 'lifespan' of a discourse such as teleworking, through the perspective of actors such as FlexiTeam whose role is to promote and promulgate the discourse. In the political contest for dominance, the formulators of discourses are unlikely to remain passive. In addition, the discourses themselves are unlikely to remain fixed and unchanging. FlexiTeam appeared keen to 'jump on the bandwagon' of newly emerging fads and fashions in order to stop teleworking 'falling out of fashion'. For example, as work-life balance was increasing on the agenda of organisations and Government (see section 7.2.1), FlexiTeam sought to expand their consultancy portfolio into this area. Exploring the FlexiTeam's discourse longitudinally would hopefully elucidate the processes through which certain discourses receive attention while others become left behind.

The main argument of this research was that normative control was not 'total', even within a team who produce the discourse they consume. This appears to call into question the power of organisational discourses in the colonisation of subjectivity. The challenge remaining for research is therefore to delineate the exact limits, ambiguities, contradictions, schisms and points of resistance to discourse, especially by those who produce the discourse in question. This would further the development of existing theories of the discourse/subjectivity relationship. Chapter 6 outlined a few examples of such data. However, this data was gathered incidentally as opposed to being part of an explicit research

agenda. Returning to the field with this as an explicit research agenda would help to delineate more precisely the power and limits of the teleworking consultancy discourse.

This study not only has implications for our understanding of virtual teamwork and the unique situation of FlexiTeam, but also wider implications for studies of organisational change in general. The research agenda arising from my research for other theorists of subjectivity are twofold. First, more research into the reflexive relationship experienced by managers as they simultaneously 'practice' what they 'preach' to others would contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of *managerial* subjectivity. Managers are not simply the 'agents of capital', or the producers and promoters of discourses, but are also subjects of and subject to various organisational discourses. Further research is required to explore the forms of subjectivity constructed by managers.

Second, my study suggests that researchers of organisational change need to bear in mind the *limits* of the discourses they seek to study. Even where responses do not appear to fit into the category 'resistance', the analyst should be sensitive to possible variations in discursive constitution. The colonisation of subjectivity should not simply be assumed but instead should be taken as the very *question* for analysis. By exploring the indeterminacy of discursive constitution within a team who would perhaps be most expected to identify with the discourse, given their role in its production and promotion, my study appears to call into question the power of organisational discourse in general. In other words, if subjectivity was not normalised in a total fashion in a team who created and sell the discourse, to what extent can subjectivity be anticipated to be normalised in teams who do not experience this reflexive relationship? This

question could usefully be taken up as a research agenda in future empirical studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

1. Could you describe your current job.
2. Could you describe where you would be working in a typical week.
(At home, client sites, hotdesk, on the road etc.)
3. What relationships are important for getting your job done successfully?
4. How do you nurture those relationships (use names from Q3)?
5. How do you keep in touch with these people (use names)?
6. Why do you go and see people (use names)?
(Could you not have done that by phone or e-mail?)
7. Are there particular people you call on when you have got a problem, or need some help or advice?
8. How did you get to know them (use names)?
9. What do you think is important for getting ahead in your career?
10. What do you think your promotion prospects are at the moment?
11. Has your career turned out the way you expected?
12. Are there any events or people that have been crucial in influencing where your career has taken you?
(probe: what made you choose the profession ? this company ? etc)
13. What do you think is going to be your next career move?
14. Where do you see yourself in the future?
15. Do you have any particular career goals?
16. How do you plan to make that (name the goal) happen?

Appendix 2: Code of Ethics and Confidentiality

For the individual:

- This PhD research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is not sponsored by any individual within the company.
- Participants must grant their permission before taking part in the study, be made aware of the aims of the study and the confidentiality assured by the researcher.
- All data including tape recordings and fieldnotes is held securely on computer or in locked cabinets.
- Information provided by participants is not passed on to managers, subordinates, colleagues, or customers.
- Anonymity is assured by changing any identifying information including name and job title.
- Participants can withdraw from the study at any time.
- Individuals can have access to the final thesis and any original data provided by themselves.

For the company:

- The company will be given a pseudonym unless it wishes to be named.
- The analysis is entirely the opinion of the researcher and does not represent the opinion of the company or any individual within the company.
- The company can have access to the final thesis and any publications, but not data regarding individual participants to protect their confidentiality.
- Business critical or sensitive information can be removed at the discretion of the company.

Appendix 3: 'Tips for Teleworkers: Managing your Career'³⁹

One of the common myths about homeworking is that when you are 'out of sight' of your manager you are 'out of mind' when it comes to promotion and development opportunities. Although this is a common *fear* about homeworking it has never been shown to be the case in *reality*.

The fear only seems to arise if homeworkers are evaluated on how much 'face-time' they put in at the office. Instead of your performance shining through, recognition of your hard work is clouded by a culture of 'presenteesim'. A relationship based on trust and evaluation based on objectives should alleviate any fear of being 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Here are some tips for homeworkers on how to manage your career effectively:

1. Be in the driving seat of your own career - don't wait until your boss suggests a career move, it may never happen!
2. Develop your own 'portfolio' of skills and experience - make yourself indispensable to the people you work for.
3. The world of work changes rapidly - ensure you get the training and development you need to keep your CV up to date.
4. Keep yourself informed on the latest developments in your field - make sure that you are at the centre of the next big project.
5. Develop a network of contacts you can turn to if you need help or advice - and return the favour once in a while too.
6. Remember the power of the 'human touch' - don't rely just on email and the phone, meet with people as well to develop a trusting basis to your relationship.
7. Use your precious 'face-time' in the office effectively - arrange to see the people who are most important to your career.
8. Intelligence alone will not see you through - develop your 'emotional intelligence' and work on your communication, listening, empathy and teamworking skills.

³⁹ A version of this article is published in *Teleworker* vol. 8 Sep-Oct 2001 and is currently on the FlexiTeam website, as at June 2003 (address withheld to protect anonymity)

9. Communicate what you are doing regularly with your manager - but don't copy her in on every email, be sensitive to her workload.
10. Set clear objectives that are achievable but challenging - agree them together with your manager and review them regularly.
11. Manage your managers' expectations - if you are falling behind target let her know, catch any problems early so there are no surprises.
12. Remember that actions speak louder than words - deliver on your promises, meet deadlines, and show you can be trusted to work autonomously.