Introduction

The three editors of this handbook have been interested in gaining a deeper understanding of team effectiveness for several decades. This led each of us (in different ways) to seek to understand how interacting virtually changed the dynamics of organizational teams. As a result, collectively, we have conducted reviews of the virtual team literature (e.g., Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004; Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen & Hakonen, 2015) and have examined virtual teams empirically with a focus on topics such as virtual team leadership (e.g., Hambley, O’Neill & Kline, 2007) and how team virtuality shaped team processes and performance (e.g., Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp & Gilson, 2012).

That said, each of us have an appreciation that individuals work within teams, and that teams are nested within organizations. Accordingly, some of us have focused on the individual effects of virtual work (e.g., O’Neill, Hambley & Bercovich, 2014; O’Neill, Hambley, Greidanus, MacDonnell & Kline, 2009) and we rounded out our team with two graduate students who had interest in team effectiveness and virtual workplaces. One of our first meetings as a full team centered around how we would pull together the various topics that are applicable to virtual work which is, in our mind, the appropriate topic to consider versus just focusing on telework, virtual teams, or organizational-level factors. Likewise, without the presence of technology, virtual work is not possible. As such and as discussed in the introduction to each section of the handbook, the book is structured around these topics/levels: technology, individual virtual work, virtual teams, and organizational-level factors to consider regarding virtual work.

When our team started discussing this handbook, the COVID-19 pandemic was just starting to take shape and we anticipated that this would make virtual work even more salient in organizations. However, we could not have fully anticipated the impact that the pandemic would truly have. In fact, as we continued our work over the last year on this handbook, much of the world embraced virtual work on a scale we could never have imagined. Likewise, many argue that the world of work is irrevocably changed and will forever have some component of virtual work. In fact, earlier this week, CNN reported that remote work is likely here to stay.

This shift is likely to have both positive and negative consequences. Specifically, there are many individuals that are pleased by the increased opportunities to work remotely (e.g., Maurer, 2021). In contrast, a lead article in the BBC news feed highlighted the difficulty of managing a hybrid workforce and CNBC recently commented on the number of CEOs that are starting to call their employees back to the office. Similarly, such a transition back to the office has both positive and negative consequences for employees, teams, and entire organizations (e.g., Sundaram, 2020). So, while we thought this handbook was timely before, we know it is now!

However, while the pandemic has made the topic of virtual work more prominent, it is not a new phenomenon within organizations or a new topic within the academic literature. Specifically, companies have had employees working remotely (historically referred to as teleworkers) for decades. Likewise, researchers have been examining the effect of virtual work and computer mediated communication on employees’ well-being, team performance, and organizational outcomes for just as long. That said, the pandemic provided a global lived experience that has significantly broadened and deepened our understating of virtual work.
In fact, what has changed in the last couple of years is the pace of acceleration to virtual work. Prior to the pandemic, in most cases virtual work was traditionally embraced in a planned and systemic way, matching employees’ skills, knowledge, and abilities to technological capabilities and tasks needs. In contrast, in the face of a global pandemic, everything changed, and organizations were forced to have all but their essential workers transition to virtual work almost overnight. Accordingly, there was little to no time to plan, process, or develop guidelines for how the new reality, of how all communication being via technology, would work. And yet, somehow work got done, employees remained productive, motivated, and engaged. Likewise, teams met deadlines, onboarded new members, and organizations remained productive and able to conduct business as normal, well maybe business as new normal.

In fact, given how well the transition to virtual work turned out for many organizations, they are now evaluating whether they want to go back to in-person work, remain virtual, or use some form of hybrid configuration. Likewise, individual employees are evaluating their current jobs and organizations in terms of how much flexibility they provide, and, in many cases, employees are leaving their current employer for one that is more flexible in terms of the extent to which they can manage their work virtually. As a result of what has been experienced over the last couple of years, what happens next will be very interesting for scholars of virtual work along with managers and their employees.

Many employees have embraced working virtually. With no commute, they have more time and money to spend in other areas of their lives. At the same time, many organizations are struggling to come up with how best to transition employees back to the office in some aspect to make use of the office space that organizations have invested in. While there were certainly some struggles along the way, many managers have now learned how to work with their teams remotely, and technology advancements are occurring almost daily allowing for different forms of performance monitoring, collaboration, and team bonding. And yet, not everyone is happy. Many yearn for the camaraderie they experienced at the office, and we have seen significantly higher levels of burnout and stress. In part, these levels of burnout and stress have been attributed to the ability that these technological advancements possess to enable employees to work from anywhere at any time. As a result, many employees feel that their teammates, managers, and organizations expect them to be available and work from anywhere at any time placing a stress on work/life balance.

Accordingly, within this handbook we build upon the foundation of research and practice that was in place regarding virtual work prior to the pandemic. We say build upon because many of the things believed to be true about virtual work were proven with the wholesale transition to virtual work that occurred globally. However, this is not to say that everything turned out as expected. In fact, we learned over the past couple of years that many of the things that the virtual work literature thought was “known” turned out to not be true or turned out to be different in some respect when put into practice. Accordingly, the authors of the various chapters included in this handbook have leveraged what was known about virtual work based on prior research, but also have highlighted phenomenon that may have behaved differently than expected over the prior years of extensive virtual work during the pandemic. And based upon this, the various authors shine the light on areas where the virtual work literature should continue to develop to better understand how virtual work actually happens in practice.

Again, there are many ways to discuss virtual work. In this book we take a holistic approach based upon a basic assumption that without technology, virtual work cannot happen.
Accordingly, we start our discussion with several chapters that discuss the importance and impact of technology on virtual work. Next, we recognize that without individuals there are no teams. As such, following the chapters on technology, we have several chapters that discuss individual and virtual team topics. Finally, we recognize that without the individuals and teams there are no organizations and therefore, this handbook concludes with a section on organizational-level virtual work topics. This interconnected, nested view allows us to take a holistic integrated approach to virtual work. In so doing, our hope is that we provide a structure for the reader of this handbook to better understand the various streams of work that are focused on virtual work so that the readers of this handbook can contribute to the evolution of virtual work research and practice over the coming decades as the topic of virtual work is only going to become more and more important.

REFERENCES


