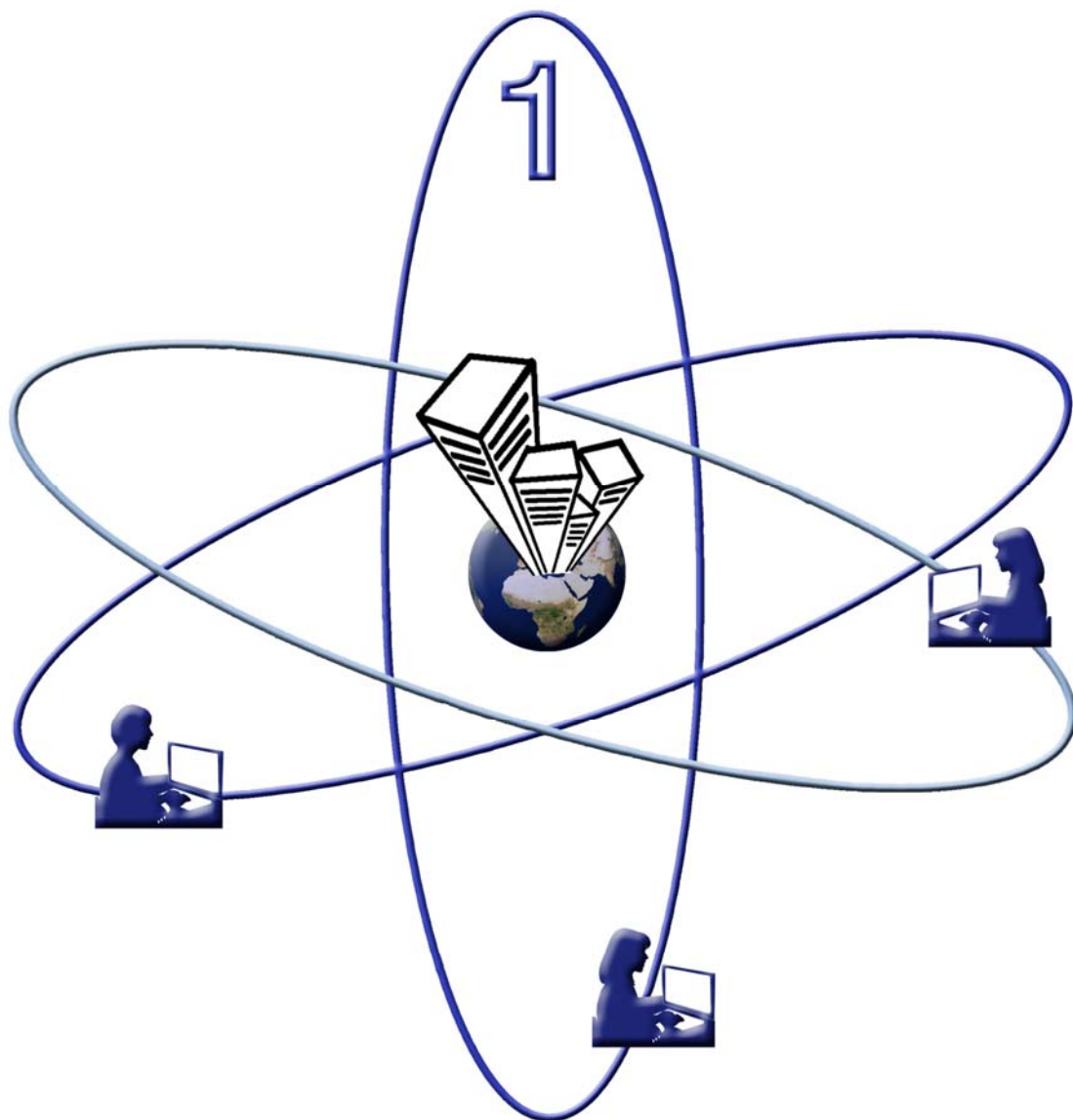# The management of people, processes and places in the virtual workplace

INTRODUCTION

1

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> *"The business of business is not only business."*
>
> **The Fourth Wave: business in the 21st century**
> **(Maynard Jr. & Mehrtens, 1996:48)**

1.1 BACKGROUND

1.1.1 People, processes and places

"The business of business is not only business" (Maynard & Mehrtens, 1996:48) as it involves more than just executing transactions. Being profitable and making money is one component of business. Business is about people (its biggest asset), processes, places and connecting these **people, processes** and **places** in the most efficient manner. People, processes and places are key elements and although these elements are separate and different, a distinct overlap exists, connecting people, processes and places. An effective *process* involves *people* and their relationships to their surroundings or *place.* Process is therefore intimately linked to people and in addition linked to place (Campbell, MacKay & Kelly, 2004:1, 2).

Business has evolved over time, moving towards the virtual environment through the use of technology and the internet to offer, amongst others, on-line shopping, such as the well-known amazon.com, Kalahari.net and various retail businesses. Due to rapidly developing technology, the workplace has been subjected to the same type of transformation with a significant movement from the traditional workplace towards the virtual workplace, which is a workplace with the ability to move quickly and easily. A workplace's ability to adapt to the changing environment relates to its swift reaction towards demands, leading to reconfiguring of resources and activities (Wright & Snell, 1998:758).

The development in technology has not only transformed the way in which business is conducted and work is executed, it has also led to the explosion of

social networking, that is the way in which **people** interact through the use of technology.   A vast number of networking sites exist on the internet, to mention a few – Facebook, Friendster, Xanga, Bebo and Cyworld (Sellers, 2006:35).   The social networking site, MySpace, was developed by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe to promote local arts, music and to "*connect friends and fans who connected friends and fans*". A site, such as MySpace, is home to thousands of filmmakers, musicians and comedians. MySpace has grown from a small music site promoting local music into a cultural powerhouse with more than 100 million registered users of which the majority is eighteen years and older (Sellers, 2006:36). With Twitter, a unique social media tool, being added to the world of social networking family, friends and colleagues are instantly linked through the use of messaging. Microblogging with Twitter links social networks, other blogs and websites thus expanding social networking as used by many individuals (Oliveri, 2009). Social networking obtained through these networking sites, stretch across continents, leading to the expansion of our boundaries, leaving us to be influenced by and be receptive to other cultures. These social networks are available thanks to internet technology which enables access to many different websites (Zemliansky & Amant, 2008:440) through millions of computers and thousands of connected, entangled networks (Rayport & Jaworski, 2002:33–34).

Modern communication technologies enabling cross-continental connectivity has not only changed the way in which people interact, but also the manner in which business is conducted, together with the processes supporting business activities.

 "*The business of business is not only business*" (Maynard & Mehrtens, 1996:48) as business **processes** are an integral part of business. Organisations have a tendency to be process unfriendly resulting in processes being structured around departments focusing on single tasks (Hammer, 2001:55). The detrimental effect of this approach is that organisations lose sight of the end-to-end process as the organisation is dealing with isolated pieces of the whole, resulting in employees or people

becoming disconnected and not aligned to a one common goal (Hammer, 2001:1, 53, 56). An effective process, on the other hand, assists people to function in harmony with their workplace and surroundings as they understand the bigger context, that is the what, why, where and when, they are performing in (Hammer, Leonard & Davenport, 2004:16).

"*Suddenly, business is not so easy anymore ...*" Hammer (2001:55) because the traditional work environment *(place)* as it has been known over decades has changed in various ways due to the opportunities provided by technological development. Place consists of more than one component, namely the physical environment, the landscape and cultural component, with the cultural component partially overlapping with people and their unique interaction with their environment (Campbell et al, 2004:3).

Activities *(process)* that used to be executed manually have been automated, mail pouches have been replaced with fax machines and email, and teleconferencing allows for employees to meet irrespective of their location, bridging time differences. Employees *(people)* no longer need to work from a traditional office, but can work from remote locations, such as airports, hotels and restaurants *(place)* using wireless technology. The nature of work has gradually started to change and with that the management of the people, the workplace and its processes.

The relationship between people, process, place and technology is depicted in figure 1.1 below. *People* are connected to their workplace through the use of technology, executing processes supporting the organisation and its business activities. *Processes* are executed by people from different workplaces, which are the traditional or virtual workplaces using technology. The workplace can be seen as that *place* from where people execute certain processes and functions through the use of technology to support the organisation. For the sake of illustrating this relationship in figure 1.1 general reference is made to the workplace as place.
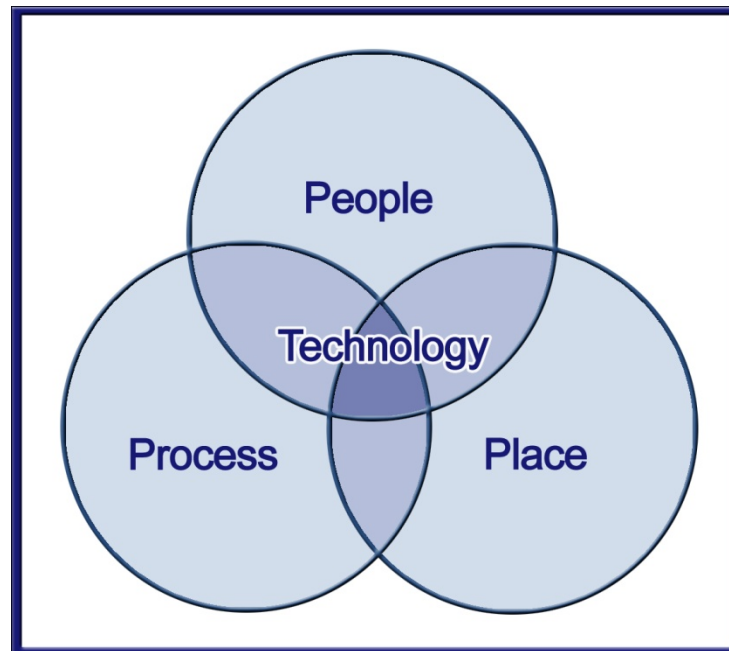
**Figure 1.1: Relationship between
people, process, places and technology**

Technology can be seen as an enabler for business process management (BPM) through the use of workflow systems for the automation of manual business operations, thereby simplifying and streamlining existing business processes, but BPM does not equate to a technology (Jeston & Nelis, 2009:9,404). BPM is a structured, management discipline with skilled *people* who first improve *processes* before automating it thereby achieving the *organisation's* objectives through the improvement, management and control of essential business processes (Jeston & Nelis, 2009:3, 6, 11)

Thus, BPM is a manner in which interaction between *people*, *processes* and the *place* is established and depicted below in figure 1.2 below.
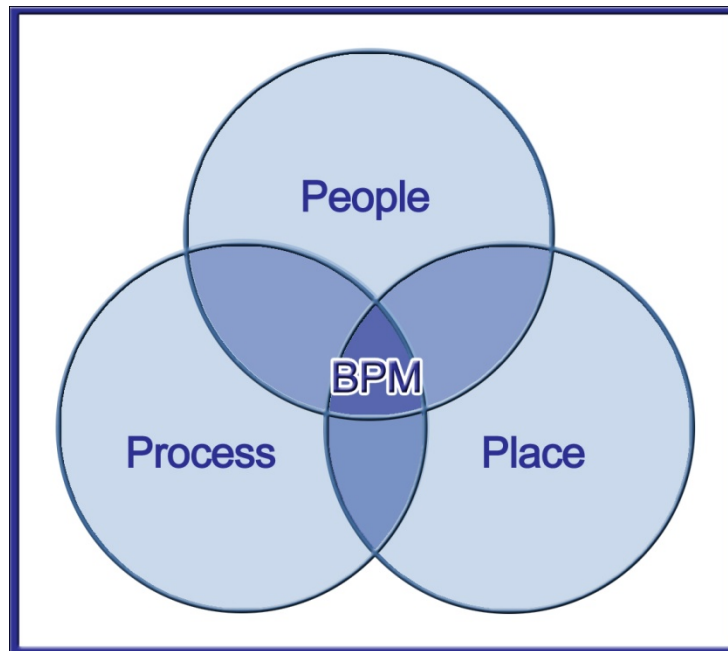
Figure 1.2: BPM–Relationship between people, process and places

1.1.2 Changing nature of work

Before we explore the virtual workplace, we should review the changing nature of work as this will allow us to gain some appreciation for the many advantages offered by the virtual workplace.

The Agricultural Revolution was known as the First Wave, followed by the Industrial Revolution (Second Wave) and then the Post-industrial era known as the Third Wave (Toffler, 1980:13–14). The Fourth Wave was characterised by nuclear power and basic electronics. Development of information and telecommunication technology characterise the Information Age, alternatively known as the Fifth Wave. This development has "*made the world a smaller place that is less geographically dependent"* (Wymbs, 2004:700), with Devezas, Linstone and Santos (2005:917) adding networking and the existence of the virtual office to this era. Business process re-engineering followed by business process management is also embedded in this era (Smith & Fingar, 2002:56–57). Development is taken a step further with the Sixth Wave or Nanotechnology Age emerging (Wonglimpiyarat, 2005:1350).

These eras started off in different countries at different times (Miller, 1967:221). Russia embarked on transforming from an almost entirely agricultural state to an industrial state during the late nineteenth century, whilst America accomplished this much earlier. India would also only enter the Industrial Era at a later stage.

The same phenomenon is evident when investigating the emergence of the Information Age with special reference to ICT access (Keniston & Kumar, 2003:7). Significant and overwhelming inconsistencies exist between *"the so-called "North" (industrialized and wealthy nations like the U.S., West Europe, and Japan) and the "South" (virtually all developing nations)"*. Another crucial trend relating to the speed of development was also identified. The industrial revolution with its factory production, steam engines and railways as well as chemical and electrical industries changed life forever. Even more so was and is our lives changed by the speed of the Information Technology (IT) communication revolution as *"... it took at least a century before the printing press touched 50 million individuals. It took 38 years for radio to reach the same number, and thirteen years for television. But the World Wide Web, in only four years, exceeded the 50,000,000 mark"* (Keniston & Kumar, 2003:6).

The Information Age and IT go hand in hand. As part of the evaluation of this era we need to bear in mind that information technology is not and will not be neutral as noted by Du Plooy and Roode (nd:2). It impacts on societies, communities, families as well as individuals. The impact is not restricted to individuals' work lives but also to their social lives as boundaries between work and social life become more blurred and vague. According to Giddens, as cited by Walsham (2001:14–5) the key features of contemporary society relate to "*time-space distanciation*". Traditional societies were linked through **place;** however, information technology enables the existing world to bridge time zones and space through email and embark on email communication and interaction when needed. Giddens also argues that increasing trust is being placed on information technology and systems as face-to-face interaction is being replaced by technology enabled interaction, such as email and facsimile. The impact of place on traditional societies is interpreted as

traditional societies having previously been linked through a place, such as a bank. They do not necessarily have this link any more due to technology enabled banking that can be done at any time any place, thus moving the traditional society towards becoming a contemporary society.

Through the use of information technology and its various applications, time and space have been bridged. This bridging of time and space has changed the way people conduct their business and related activities, resulting in irregular or extended working hours and changes from the traditional working place to the virtual workplace as can be found in telecommuting and hotelling. Zemliansky and St Amant (2008:2) refer to the virtual workplace as working at a distance through the use of technology.

Bridging of time and space has also resulted in our boundaries being expanded beyond our control. This relates not only to our working boundaries, but also to our awareness of the universe as a whole. The whole world has become "much smaller" as a result of information technology's reachability (span distance) and speed of connectivity, but it has also become "much bigger" since we can now obtain immeasurable volumes of information from all over the world.

People are frequently connected for personal and business purposes through the use of Skype and email, demonstrating the insignificance of time and space in 21st century activities. Time has become an instance in space. When observing our own time zone, that is South Africa, at the present instance of time, namely 12:00 noon, the Australian time zone will be in our future (that is 20:00 still to come) and the Canadian time zone is in our past (that is 06:00 has already passed) as depicted in figure 1.3 below. These instances of time exist concurrent, although it may not be experienced as such due to the bridging of time and space.
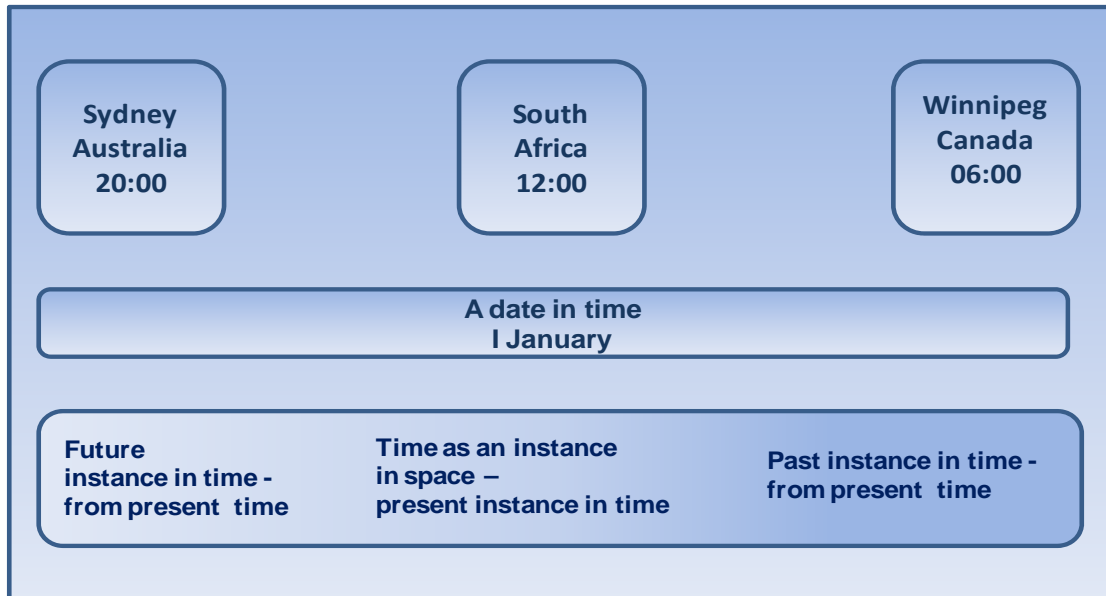
Figure 1.3: Time as an instance in space

The management and leadership perspectives needed for optimal functioning in the virtual workplace (that is the Fifth Wave), differ comprehensively from those required in the preceding waves (Bennis, 1993:13-16), with the emphasis moving from bureaucracy to collaboration and more specifically collaboration of specialists in a project driven environment which is about the managing of contracted deliverables within agreed-upon time frames.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.2.1 Problem 1: Organisational structure change (people)

In order for businesses to survive in rapidly changing internal and external environments, they need to be able to adapt effectively and efficiently (Bennis, 1993:13) with organisational structure becoming "temporary" and rapidly adaptive with the aim of solving problems, increasing profits and elevating productivity. People are no longer only working in a traditional workplace with fixed structures, but they are becoming virtual workers with constantly changing support structures.

1.2.2 Problem 2: Change in social structure (people)

This changing environment brings with it a new or different way of interacting with employees, partners and allies (Bennis, 1993:16) and social structures

need to change from mechanisms of domination to structures allowing imagination and freedom of inquisitiveness and thought to address the problem of adaptability and exploit the pleasure of work. The social structure of the people working in the traditional workplace may differ from that of the people working in the virtual workplace.

1.2.3 Problem 3: Increase in information (process)

Businesses are empowered through the increase in quality and volume of information, which is information regarding business processes supporting the core activities of the business, customer preferences, new production methods and demographic changes, as well globalisation. The speed at which this information becomes available, also requires a swift response in order to survive in a challenging business world. Business processes supporting the virtual workplace may also be impacted by information, thus the unique business processes supporting the virtual workplace needs to be understood.

1.2.4 Problem 4: Change in workplace (place)

Due to technological development, such as email, video- and telephone-conferencing, the workplace changed over time from a traditional, fixed and specific location to one that is virtual and decentralised. The characteristics unique to the virtual workplace need to be understood in order to determine how people, processes and places management in the virtual workplace is executed and supported.

The problem statements above are summarised as follow: ***How can virtual workers be supported given the changing nature of work, structures and workplaces?***

This changing work environment and accompanying globalisation which also relates to the bridging of time and space, impact on our culture with our culture being exposed to other cultures. This naturally leads to questions being asked about our culture and existence. This research acknowledges the existence of culture as part of the work environment; however, culture as a feature topic will not be covered by the research of this thesis. However,

organisational culture will be reviewed as part of the research into the workplace.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to create an understanding of the interaction between the ***people, processes and places*** components and management thereof in the virtual workplace. This entails the development of a framework for the management of people, processes and places in the virtual workplace.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to obtain an understanding of people, processes and places and the management thereof in the virtual workplace as part of Fifth Wave, a descriptive, interpretive approach will be followed as discussed in chapter 2. An attempt will be made to create an understanding of the management of people, processes and places in the virtual workplace by obtaining answers to the following main research questions.

1.4.1 Place

What characteristics unique to the virtual workplace distinguish it from the traditional organisation?

1.4.2 Process

What characteristics are unique to business processes in the virtual workplace, distinguishing them from business processes in the traditional organisation?

1.4.3 People

What is an appropriate framework or structure to support the management of people, processes and places in the virtual workplace?

To assist in answering the main research questions, the sub-questions as indicated in table 1.1, will be addressed:

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

WHAT IS: Investigates the core or essence of the research problem and strives to describe the structure of the problem and its associated concepts. According to Roode, JD (nd) the assumption is namely that universally accepted description or definitions exist.

1.1	What research approach will be followed?
1.2	What is learning?
1.3	What is hermeneutics?
1.4	What is a virtual workplace?
1.5	What characteristics are unique to the virtual workplace?
1.6	What is a business process?
1.7	What is business process management (BPM)?
1.8	What management characteristics are unique to the virtual workplace?

HOW DOES: Describes the problem through direct observation as it unfolds in reality.

2.1	How does the virtual workplace impact on business?
2.2	How does business processes differ between the virtual workplace and the traditional workplace?
2.3	How do management characteristics differ between the virtual workplace and the traditional workplace?
2.4	How does business processes and technology impact on an individual's activities/performance in the virtual workplace?

WHY IS: Describes the real-life behaviour and features or characteristics of the research problem in order to establish relationships between the different variables within the area of research. Roode, JD (nd) notes that the assumption can be made that revealing these relationships can lead to generalisation of the research area and its contributory or underlying consequences.

3.1	Why does the virtual workplace need different business processes?
3.2	Why does the virtual workplace need a different management style?

3.3	Why does the individual working in the virtual workplace require different business processes?
HOW SHOULD: Focuses on conclusions, implications and insights obtained during research as well as norms or standards set by the research results. It can have various outcomes, such as prescriptive or regulatory conclusions or redefining of the problem area.	
4.1	How should people, processes and places interact in the virtual workplace?
4.2	How should people, processes and places be supported in the virtual work place?
4.3	How should training and development be done in the virtual workplace?

Table 1.1: Research sub-questions

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The research framework is defined through the use of research questions which assist in defining the problem or subject to be investigated. The areas of research mentioned by Du Plooy (nd:10) correspond to Burrell and Morgan's (2000:1–4) sets of assumptions. In search of a research framework conceptualisation in social science is done in terms of four sets of assumptions, namely ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. These four sets are mutually exclusive, each providing its own distinctive analysis of social science.

The assumptions of an ontological nature *"concern the very essence of the phenomena under investigation"* (Burrell & Morgan, 2000:1). The basic ontological questions which are at stake are: *Should reality be investigated as external to the individual,* and: *Is reality part of the individual's mind or mindset?* The ontological nature is therefore seen as the individual's view of reality which could be external to the individual, that is "out there in the world" or "a *product of his own mind*" (Burrell & Morgan, 2000:1).

Assumptions about the epistemological nature, which is the nature of knowledge, relate to the format in which knowledge can be obtained as well

as what knowledge should be regarded as "true" and what should be regarded as "false" (Burrell & Morgan, 2000:2). Describing knowledge as true beliefs incorporating preferred relations between the believer and the facts began with Plato's *Theaetetus,* in which he postulates knowledge being a true belief including an aspect of our own reasoning (logos). Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is described as "*its central questions include the origin of knowledge; the place of experience in generating knowledge, and the place of reason in doing so; the relationship between knowledge and certainty, and between knowledge and the impossibility of error ...*" *(Oxford dictionary of philosophy*, 1996:123, 225,289).

The assumptions relating to human nature focus on relationships between human beings and their environment. The human nature assumption views human beings and their experiences either as products of the environment with human beings conditioned by external circumstances (controlled by the environment) or as creators of their own environment, that is the controller of the environment. These sets of assumptions require different research methodologies and therefore have implications of a methodological nature.
 It is important that the most appropriate methodology be selected for the type of research to be done (Cryer, 1996:45). Information Systems (IS) "*have introduced interpretivism to the study of richness in managerial communication that uses information technology*" (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997:150). According to these authors "*interpretivism gives explicit recognition to the lifeworld"* which correlates with Heidegger's "*lived experience",* also referred to as *Erlebnis* (Introna, 1997:64, 67).

One of two views can be taken on the social world (Burrell & Morgan, 1994:2–3), namely a "*hard external objective reality*" with the scientific focus on analysis of relationships and uniformity between different components; or a "*subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world*". When applying *"subjective experience"* in their search for understanding, individuals focus on different issues and approaches. The main objective is to obtain an understanding of the way in which individuals create, adjust to and interpret the world in which they are functioning with the emphasis on what is "*unique

and particular to the individual" rather than "*general and universal*". This creation of understanding closely correlates with Heidegger's *Erlebnis* or "*lived experience*" as well as conceptualisation of the part (text) and context (whole) as used by Introna (1997:64,67). *Erlebnis* is also seen as the individual's awareness of the assumptions or experiences which formed the basis of his or her perspectives, viewpoint and understanding the boundaries within which these perspectives have been created (Burrell & Morgan, 1994: ix).

1.5.1 Qualitative versus quantitative

Research approaches can be divided into two main types, namely qualitative and quantitative. These can be combined or used separately. Careful consideration must be given when combining these methods (McEvoy & Richards, 2006:66) as it can become a "*methodological minefield*" as it will provide significant scope for confusion and misunderstanding. Quantitative research is used to understand and explain social phenomena (Myers, 1997a:241) that is more highly formalised and more explicitly controlled (Mouton & Marais, 1994:57,155). Quantitative research focuses on amounts and numbers, compared to a qualitative research approach that explores the creation of meaning, thus it focuses on "what" (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:139).

The traditional distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research as provided by McEvoy and Richards (2006:67–68) have been expanded to include Myers (1997b:2–5) and is provided in table 1.2. The purpose of the expanded table is to provide a summarised view of the differences identified by the authors.

Traditional distinctions associated with quantitative and qualitative methods		
Subject	**Quantitative**	**Qualitative**
Paradigm	Positivist, identify universal laws, based on identification of statistical relationships between dependent and independent variables. Focus on numbers, amounts.	Interpretivist, emphasise understanding the way in which the world is socially constructed and understood, non-numerical. Explore creation of meaning, the "what".
Tools	Structured interviews, questionnaires, randomised control trails, systematic reviews, statistical analysis, laboratory experiments, surveys.	Focus groups, unstructured interviews, textual analysis, ethnographic case studies, observations and participant observation, documents, text, researcher's impressions and interactions.
Ontology	Tangible reality	Intangible reality
Epistemology	Regularities established via empirical research and deductive/inductive reasoning.	Knowledge constructed via social interaction/hermeneutics understanding.
Methodology	Hypothesis testing	In depth field work
Data analysis	Verification/falsification	Interpretation of meaning
Other differences	Objective Discover general laws (nomothetic) Aim is prediction and control. Outsider (etic) perspective	Subjective Interest in uniqueness of participants (ideographic) Aim is explanation and understanding Insider (emic) perspective

Table 1.2: Traditional distinctions that are associated with quantitative and qualitative methods
Based on McEvoy and Richards (2006:67–68) and Myers (1997b:2–5)

The question as to whether quantitative and qualitative research methods should be used together, has been challenged by two opposing schools of thought, namely the purists and pragmatists. The purists' viewpoint is to use either quantitative or qualitative whereas the pragmatists' viewpoint is to use the method that will provide optimal results. The anti-conflationists argue that although there are general differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods, the researcher needs to distinguish between the "logic of justification" and the specific method that is employed, since the same method can be used by researchers from different ontological and epistemological starting points (McEvoy & Richards, 2006:68-69).

The alternative viewpoints of the purists, pragmatists and anti-conflationists with reference to distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methods have been summarised in table 1.3. The purpose of this table is to show the differences in viewpoints in a summarised manner.

Alternative positions			
Subject	**Purist**	**Pragmatist**	**Anti-conflationist**
Methodological standpoint	Absolute standpoint to use either quantitative or qualitative. Leininger: Interpretive view: Quantitative and qualitative too fundamentally different to be reconciled	Use method best for optimum results	Differences between quantitative and qualitative not an absolute separation between qualitative and quantitative (dichotomy). Only use quantitative and qualitative methods if universal ontological and epistemological position exists. Distinguish between logic

			rationalisation and method to be used.
Differences between qualitative and quantitative	Quantitative and qualitative are mutually exclusive	Quantitative and qualitative could complement each other	Qualitative description used in introduction to quantitative
	Quantitative and qualitative have almost no common ground	Researchers struggle with methodological tension on which approach to use	Qualitative test theoretical hypothesis
	Quantitative and qualitative are incommensurable – not judged by the same standards	Difficulty experienced: to understand "dissonant data", using methods based on inconsistent epistemological assumptions, for example linking contextual findings to quantitative findings	Quantitative use statistics as descriptive narrative

Table 1.3: Alternative positions related to distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods
Based on McEvoy and Richards (2006:68–69)

It should be noted that qualitative research and interpretivism are not synonymous as qualitative research may not be interpretive depending on the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher (Myers, 1997b:3). Following on this, is "…*the interpretive, critical and positivist epistemologies related to qualitative research. These epistemologies are philosophically distinct, but in social research the differences are not always clear*" (Myers, 1997b:3). Orlikowksi and Baroudi (1991:4–5) state that they follow Chua's classification of research epistemologies into positivist, interpretive and critical

studies. The differences between the interpretive, critical and positivist studies are summarised in table 1.4 below (Orlikowksi & Baroudi, 1991:5–8, 12–19; Myers, 1997b:3–4; Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994:33–34; Chua as well as Lincoln & Guba in Orlikowksi & Baroudi, 1991:7, 9).

Qualitative research epistemology			
Subject	**Interpretive**	**Critical**	**Positivist**
Methodological standpoint	Start with an assumption as a given. It is socially constructed and reinforced by humans through their actions and interaction.	Start with assumption that social reality is historically constituted. Knowledge grounded in social and historical practices.	Dominant in information systems research. Reality and our knowledge thereof are social products that cannot be understood without the social actors.
Construction	Construction through language, consciousness, shared meanings. Use researcher's questions and categories and not those of the participants.	Construction can consciously be done through changing economic or social circumstances. Conscious change can be hampered by cultural, political and social domination.	Phenomenon is single, tangible, and fragmentable. Research techniques encourage "deterministic explanations" as derived from interaction between researcher and subject. Researcher and subject are independent with clear differentiation between observation reports and theory statements.
Interaction	Subjective and inter-subjective meaning created through interaction with the world.	Focus on oppositions, conflicts and contradictions	Research passive and neutral role and does not intervene with phenomenon. "Discover" an objective social

			reality.
Creation of understanding	Understand phenomenon through assessing of the meaning assigned by participants, i.e. participant's perspective in natural settings.	Understanding created through social critique of status quo, hence highlighting restrictive and alienating conditions.	Understand phenomenon through modelling and measurement, i.e. construct a set of measurements and instruments to capture core of phenomenon. Test theory. Increase predictive understanding of phenomena.
Review	Dependent and independent variables not pre-defined. Advantage: Seek "relativistic, albeit shared understanding" of phenomena. Focus on full complexity of human understanding as situation emerges. Interpretation of social reality. Reject possibility of "factual" or "objective" events. Disadvantage: Neglects to explain historical change in social order. Omits to explain unintended consequences of actions. Does not address	Elements to be viewed in totality and not as isolated components.	Rooted in natural science. Disregard historical context of phenomena. One-to-one association between constructs of researcher's model and objects in the world. Conflict seen as dysfunctional to social system. Advantage: Researcher focuses on validity and control towards phenomena under investigation. Disadvantage: Not conducive to understanding non-deterministic, shared relationships. Only get answers to questions asked. Laboratory subjects react mechanically to research stimulus.

	structural conflicts in society and organisations. Does not examine external conditions that may give rise to meaning.		
Tools	Case study research, open-ended interviews, observational description, documentation, ethnography.	Social critique.	Large scale surveys and controlled laboratory experiments.

Table 1.4: Qualitative research epistemology
Based on Orlikowksi and Baroudi (1991:5–9, 12–19), Myers (1997b:3–4)
and Kaplan and Maxwell (1994:33–34).

This thesis will be exploring the management of the ***people, processes and places*** components related to the virtual workplace. Together with a case study and a weblog, the researcher will use focus group discussions and interviews as qualitative methods. The latter methods emphasise the one characteristic which distinguishes human beings from the natural world – their ability to talk and express themselves (Myers, 1997b:2). The research methods to be used correlate with Kaplan and Maxwell (1994:32) who indicate that qualitative methods employ data in the form of words such as those in interviews, observational descriptions of activities, conversations and documents. Qualitative research methods have been developed to assist researchers understanding people together with the social and cultural context they live and work in (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994:31, 32). The research methods of choice support the research conducted for this thesis as it assists in obtaining meaning of the people, processes and places components in the context of the virtual workplace.

A quantitative approach to research in the social sciences is more highly formalised as well as more explicitly controlled, with defined ranges (Mouton & Marais, 1994:57,155). This correlates with quantitative research focussing on numbers as stated by Cooper and Schindler (2001:139). Thus, it is not the research method of choice for this thesis.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

1.6.1 Design method

Qualitative research starts with a reasonable clear statement of the problem as the point of departure. The procedures are not necessarily strictly formalised and are therefore likely to have a philosophical mode.

A qualitative survey will be done through the use of a case study, focus group discussions, interviews and a weblog, following the Extended Hermeneutic Circle of Learning depicted in figure 2.4. These qualitative research methods were chosen to assist in the creation of meaning, thus understanding the "what" (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:139). In the research conducted for this thesis it provided the opportunity to conduct research in different scenarios ranging from focus groups with a number of participants to online participation through the use of a weblog. Quantitiatve research methods are not appropriate for this thesis as this thesis is not focussing on the interpretation of statistical data.

1.6.2 Population

The focus is on business process management (BPM) specialists and analysts from the telecommunications, financial and consulting industries in South Africa and research industries from the USA, Germany and Australia. Team leaders as well as repository and quality managers were also included as can be seen in Appendix B. This selection provided opportunity for participants from different levels and with different responsibilities to participate in the research.

- o Time: 2010
- o Sample frame: BPM specialists and process analysts, managers and team leaders working in the traditional and virtual workplaces.

- o Sample size: 4–6 people per focus group discussion
- o Sample size: Individual interviews

1.6.3 Data collection method

Data will be collected through a case study, focus group discussions, interviews and through the use of a weblog. The emphasis is on the ***people, processes and places*** components and the management of the challenges related to the virtual workplace.

A weblog or blog, as it is commonly known, will be used for online participation to demonstrate the bridging of time and space through the use of technology.

1.6.4 Data analysis

A qualitative data analysis will look for themes and categories within the words and images used by people (Oates, 2009:38). The data as obtained through the case study, focus group discussions, interviews and weblog will be analysed and categorised according to the ***people, processes and places*** components. The data will be presented with descriptive text and figures.

1.7 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results will be discussed based on the findings of the case study, focus group discussions, interviews and weblog from the different business process specialists in the traditional and virtual workplaces.

1.8 PROPOSED CHAPTER PLAN

The chapters in this document will be presented as follows:

1.8.1 Chapter 1

Chapter 1 contains the background and introduction to the dissertation, firstly dealing with the context, intended research and the problem statement. Secondly, the research approach is covered, summarising the methodology and the research method as well as the research questions.

1.8.2 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 discusses the developed Extended Hermeneutic Circle of Learning as well as the multi-method research methodology that will be used, namely case study, focus group discussions, interviews and a weblog.

1.8.3 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 consists of a detailed literature survey reflecting on the changing nature of work or waves of change and it will be displayed graphically through the use of a time scale. The following elements will be addressed:

- o Organisational structure
- o Nature of work
- o Business processes development

Further focus will be placed on elements specific to the Fifth Wave or Information Age, namely the virtual workplace.

Defining and grouping of the different virtual workplaces with its advantages and disadvantages are covered. Business process management will be defined and be differentiated from business process improvement. Business process levels and business process characteristics will be discussed followed by business process maturity.

1.8.4 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 covers the discussion and interpretation of the results obtained related to the people, processes and places management in the virtual workplace. The discussion is based on the three components mentioned earlier, namely *people, processes and places.*

1.8.5 Chapter 5

This chapter discusses the proposed framework for the management of people, processes and places in the virtual workplace based on the research results discussed in chapter 4.

1.8.6 Chapter 6

This chapter covers the conclusion, evaluation of the research principles, recommendations and limitations as well as suggestions into other areas of research.

1.9 CONCLUSION

Business evolved over time moving towards the virtual workplace together with an explosion in social networks which enabled cross-continental connectivity between people, irrespective of time or place. Process execution changed over time from manual to more automated, thereby changing the nature of work, including management practices.

The change in the nature of management and its related challenges to people, processes and places in the virtual workplace is explored through the research conducted for this thesis.

Different research approaches exist aiming to support different types of research. Quantitative and qualitative research approaches were reviewed resulting in a qualitative, interpretivist research approach that will be followed for the research conducted for this thesis. This approach has as objective to create an understanding of the way in which individuals experience, create and interpret the world they are functioning in. In the context of this thesis the world they are functioning in, relates to the virtual workplace.

The developed Extended Hermeneutic Circle of Learning as discussed in chapter 2 will form the framework for research into the people, processes and places components and its management in the virtual workplace.