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# An exploration of the experiences of flow by skilled professional contract workers

Patricia C. Johnson

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The University of San Francisco

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF FLOW BY  
SKILLED PROFESSIONAL CONTRACT WORKERS

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Organization and Leadership Program  
Department of Leadership Studies

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Patricia Johnson  
San Francisco  
May 2011

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

An Exploration of the Experiences of Flow by

Skilled Professional Contract Workers

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow experienced by skilled professional contract workers. Contract work was not new, but what was new was the type of people accepting contract work: college educated workers making more than \$75,000 a year. With the increase in workers accepting contract work, the impact on their perception of flow experiences was not known.

The overall design of this study was a qualitative research interview study (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There were two semi-structured interviews which provided the setting for a conversation with the end goal of gaining knowledge about the participants' perceived flow and optimal experiences at work both as permanent workers and contract workers. The participants were 6 skilled professional contract workers who were formerly permanent workers. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and content analysis was used to examine the interview responses. The examination of the interview responses attempted to understand the impact on flow and the flow conditions as skilled professionals transitioned from permanent work to contract work.

The extent to which the experiences of flow occurred as a contract worker when compared to the experiences of flow as a permanent worker varied among the participants. The frequency of the experiences of flow as a contract worker when compared to that as a permanent worker also varied by participant.

All of the flow conditions demonstrated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996, 1997) were confirmed in this study for the participants both as contract workers and permanent workers. In addition, there were several working conditions that emerged from this study that were related to the flow conditions. They were (a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) the perception of contract work.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been present to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Patricia Johnson  
Candidate

April 21, 2011  
Date

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Deborah P. Bloch  
Chairperson

April 21, 2011  
Date

Dr. Ellen Herda

April 21, 2011  
Date

Dr. Betty Taylor

April 21, 2011  
Date

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I also want to thank the six participants in this study who helped me deepen and expand my understanding about Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow. Despite their busy schedules, they were very generous with their time. I truly appreciate their openness and honesty in this study.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	V
LIST OF TABLES .....	IX
LIST OF FIGURES .....	X
CHAPTER 1: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	2
Background and Need for the Study.....	3
Theoretical Foundation .....	4
Research Questions.....	8
Definition of Terms .....	9
Limitations .....	11
Significance .....	11
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	13
Flow Studies .....	13
Flow in Action .....	13
Flow and the Quality of the Experience .....	16
Flow and Work Outcomes .....	18
Flow Variances .....	20
Section Summary .....	21
Contract Workers.....	23
Perception of Contract Work .....	23
Contract Worker Motivation.....	25
Contract Worker Job Satisfaction and Job Performance .....	26
Section Summary .....	27
Summary of the Review of Literature .....	28
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	31
Restatement of Purpose .....	31
Research Design .....	31
Participants.....	32
Participant Recruitment Process .....	32
Phase I Participant Solicitation .....	33
Phase II Participant validation .....	33
Interview Sites .....	34
Participant Criteria .....	34
Participant Summary.....	35
Troy.....	36
Larry.....	36
Ken.....	37

Francis.....	37
Lucy .....	37
Martha.....	38
Ethics in Research.....	38
Instrumentation .....	39
Participant Screening Questions .....	39
Interview Protocol.....	39
Interview Summary Cover Letter .....	40
Background of Researcher.....	41
Data Collection .....	42
Data Analysis.....	42
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>44</b>
Introduction.....	44
Research Question 1: Extent of Perceived Experience of Flow .....	45
Research Question 2: Working Conditions' Impact on Flow.....	50
Flow Conditions.....	50
Perceived Balance Between Challenges and Skills .....	50
Action Awareness Merging and Concentration.....	51
Loss of Awareness of Self .....	55
Clarity in Goals and Feedback.....	56
Sense of Control.....	57
Sense of Time .....	58
Autotelic Experience.....	59
Organization Complexity.....	60
Organization Politics.....	64
Bonding With the Organization and Developing Social Networks .....	67
Expert Community Support .....	72
Perception of Contract Work .....	75
Research Question 3: Worker Quality Impact on Flow.....	77
Research Question 4: Constraints and Benefits Impact on Flow.....	82
Findings Summary.....	88
<b>CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>89</b>
Introduction.....	89
Summary of Findings.....	89
Theory of Flow and Prior Research.....	95
Flow Conditions.....	95
Flow Model.....	99
Flow at Work .....	102
Quality of the Experience .....	103
Flow and Work Outcomes .....	103
Section Summary .....	104
Implications .....	105
Contract Workers.....	105
Organizations .....	107
Education .....	109



Further Research .....	110
Additional Organization Complexities and Flow .....	110
Education Level and Flow .....	111
Age, Work-life Balance, and Flow .....	111
Contract Work as Full-time Work and Flow .....	112
International Workers and Flow .....	112
Personal Reflections .....	113
REFERENCES .....	115
APPENDIXES .....	118
Appendix A: Flow Model Approval Request .....	118
Appendix B: Flow Model Approval .....	120
Appendix C: Interview Protocol .....	121
Appendix D: Relationship Between Flow and Research Questions .....	123
Appendix E: Participant Consent E-mail .....	124
Appendix F: Participant Screening Questions .....	126
Appendix G: Informed Consent Form .....	127
Appendix H: Protection of Human Subjects Approval .....	132
Appendix I: Interview Summary Cover Letter .....	134

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Participant Profile .....	35
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The new flow model.....	6
Figure 2. The new flow model.....	100

## CHAPTER 1: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

### Statement of the Problem

From 2000 to 2002 and 2004 to 2006, I worked in the financial-services industry as a permanent worker in the marketing and information-technology fields. As a permanent worker, I felt constrained and was easily bored performing repetitive tasks that offered few challenges. I discussed my feelings and concerns with coworkers and discovered some coworkers had the same experiences, but others coworkers enjoyed being a permanent worker and had positive experiences at work. In 2006 I joined a staffing firm that placed skilled professional workers on contract assignments. When I became a skilled professional contract worker, work became enjoyable and I had positive experiences at work.

These positive experiences were what Csikszentmihalyi called flow (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). In Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) studies, "the metaphor of 'flow' was one that many people used to describe the sense of effortless action they felt in moments that stood out as the best in their lives" (p. 29).

Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow hypothesized that an individual will have an optimal experience when one's perceived skill sets are in balance with the level of challenges presented to the individual.

After I became a skilled professional contract worker, some of my former coworkers who had shared my permanent-worker experiences also became skilled professional contract workers. During this time, many permanent workers were becoming skilled professional contract workers. Brown (2009) later coined the increase in contract workers as the Gig Economy. Gigs were defined as "a bunch of free-floating

projects, consultancies, and part-time bits and pieces they try and stitch together to make what they refer to wryly as ‘the Nut’” (2009, para. 1). In Brown’s article, *The Gig Economy*, contract work or working on gigs was not new, but what was new was the type of people accepting contract work: college educated workers making more than \$75,000 a year. Skilled professional contract workers, who were permanent workers, had mixed feelings about working in this new structure. Some skilled professional contract workers enjoyed contract work because of the higher pay and the opportunity to work on complex projects requiring their skills. However, other skilled professional contract workers were not comfortable with the uncertainty of not having permanent work or company benefits.

With the increase in the new category of workers accepting contract work, the impact on their perception of flow experiences was not known. This study explored the extent skilled professional contractor workers had flow experiences versus when they were permanent workers.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow experienced by the skilled professional contract worker.

This qualitative research interview study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) provided insight into the extent of flow and the optimal experiences associated with flow for 6 skilled professional contract workers who were formerly permanent workers. The

participants were interviewed about their perceived experiences of flow as both skilled professional contract workers and permanent workers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

### Background and Need for the Study

Since the 1970s the demand for contract workers has increased each year and this trend did not seem to be changing (Rassuli, 2005). The U.S. Department of Labor predicted that from 1996 to 2006 there would be an average growth rate of 53% in the personnel supply industry and that in 2006 professional contract workers would make up 11% of the personnel supply (Rassuli, 2005). Spending on contract workers was one sign of the increase demand for contract workers. In 2003, spending on contract workers doubled to more than \$120 billion (Koba, 2009). By 2009 the nonstandard workforce, which included contract workers, made up approximately 30% of the job market and was anticipated to grow to 40% in the next 10 years (Bakshi, 2009).

In parallel, the recession, which started in December 2007, increased the number of people looking for permanent work, whereas employers were hiring contract workers. In 2009 the number of unemployed people increased to 14.5 million and the unemployment rate rose to 9.4% by May 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). David Rosenberg of Gluskin Sheff stated that one-in-three among the unemployed were looking for a job for more than 6 months without success (Mirhaydari, 2009). A 2009 CareerBuilder article (*Staffing Firms to*, 2009, Permanent and Temporary Hiring section) stated the following:

Six percent of hiring managers expect to utilize a staffing firm to help fill temporary or contract positions in the upcoming quarter, up slightly from 5 percent in the second quarter. Looking at large organizations (500+ employees) specifically, nearly 9 percent of hiring managers, expect to hire temporary or

contract employees through a staffing firm in the third quarter, compared to just over 7 percent a quarter ago. (para. 2)

As employers became confident in the economy, they started to hire again, but preferred to spend on contract workers rather than permanent workers. The increase in demand for contract workers caused unemployed permanent workers to pursue contract opportunities. The April 3, 2009 employment report showed the number of people forced to work part-time for “economic reasons” rose by 423,000 in March, to 9 million (Koba, 2009).

The contract-work category required unemployed professionals to become creative. Sorensen of HR Association World at Work stated in Bakshi’s (2009) article “We’re in the early stages of what will be a really different era in the work-place, and a growing segment of workers will need to structure their career around this model” (para. 5). As contract workers were redefining their careers, there was an opportunity to focus on their existing skills and find challenging opportunities to do so. The problem was that becoming a contract worker was a reality many had to face either by choice or of necessity. Regardless of the reason why one became a contract worker, the impact on the contract worker’s experience at work and on flow after being a permanent worker was not known.

#### Theoretical Foundation

The conceptual framework for this research was Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) was curious about what motivated people to be involved in their activities when at play. Csikszentmihalyi determined that people play because it is enjoyable; then he was curious about what made play enjoyable. He also wondered if the feeling was the same for everyone. While conducting research with his students at

Lake Forest College and then at the University of Chicago, Csikszentmihalyi discovered and coined the term *autotelic* activity; the “activity is one we do for its own sake because to experience it is the main goal” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 117). He later called this experience flow.

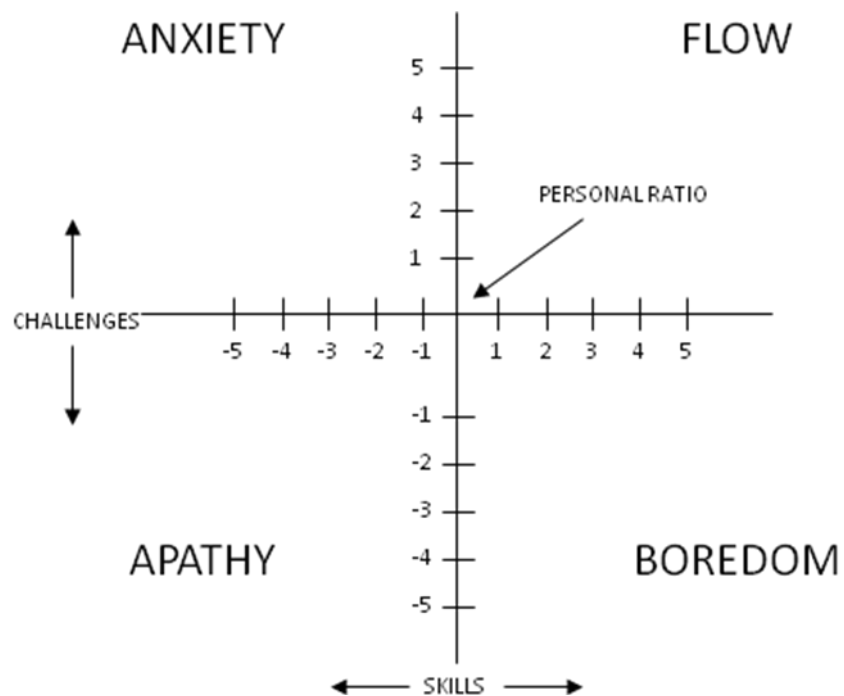
Flow is a psychological state in which the person feels cognitively resourceful, motivated, and happy at the same time. The theory of flow predicts that experiences will be most positive when there are enough opportunities for challenges to match a person’s perceived skills; in other words, there will be a positive balance between challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

People are more likely to experience flow in complex structured activities, like those found in sports, at work, or in play, where the person is in control over one’s skills and challenges. This allows the person to select the type and difficulty of the activities, to learn new skills, and to engage in more complex challenges (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). As a result, a person has an optimal experience because the balanced state of the experience is at its highest quality. There is no limit to having an optimal experience. A self-motivated person always seeks higher levels of challenges and skills, and the target is the optimal experience itself (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

“The experience of flow is a function of the skills that individuals perceive themselves to have in relation to the activity and the perceived challenges of the activity” (Ceja & Navarro, 2009, p. 666). Csikszentmihalyi diagramed this perceived relationship between skills and challenges (see Figure 1). The center of the diagram identifies the individual’s personal ratio between the perceived skills and challenges. When the



individual was presented with perceived challenges that were above one's perceived skill sets, the individual was in a state of anxiety. When the individual's perceived challenges and perceived skills were in balance, but the experience was negative, the individual was in a state of apathy. The individual was in a state of boredom when one's perceived skill sets were greater than the perceived challenges. When there was a positive balance above the personal average, the individual was in a state of flow and the experience was optimal. In the flow state there was more complexity and more opportunities for the individual to grow and develop. The individual was subjectively involved in flow and was aware of the challenges presented.



*Figure 1.* The new flow model.

*Note.* Adapted from *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*, by M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 261, New York: Cambridge University Press. Adapted with permission (see Appendixes A and B).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996, 1997) identified nine conditions that exist to achieve flow. They were as follows: (a) perceived balance between challenges and skills; (b) there was action awareness; (c) concentration on the activity; (d) clarity in goals; (e) feedback on the activity was immediate; (f) there was a sense of control; (g) there was a loss of awareness of the self; (h) the sense of time was not related to the passage of time on a clock; and (i) the experience was autotelic.

These conditions worked in harmony to create an optimal experience. A precondition for flow to occur was that the individual had a perception one could meet the demands of the activities; there was a perception of balance between challenges and skills. Once in flow the individual was focused on the activities and on one's actions. There was a sense of oneness with the activities and the actions naturally followed. When in flow, the individual knew what had to be done because the goals were clearly defined; there was purpose. This required immediate feedback regarding the activities because it allowed the individual to make adjustments where needed in relation to the goals. When in flow, the individual was not worried about losing control or about self; the individual was stress-free. The individual was very absorbed and concentrated on the activities. When these conditions existed, activities were more enjoyable and rewarding in itself.

Flow is not the same as job satisfaction; however, a link between the two could be established (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Job satisfaction describes how content someone is with his or her job (Demerouti, 2006). Whereas flow describes moments when one is having the best possible experience during an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). These moments can occur in any setting such as work, school, or play. It could be implied the better the work experience, the

happier the individual and the more satisfied one is with his or her job. However, having an experience of flow during an activity at work is not a predictor of how content one is with his or her job. During this temporal moment, there are enough perceived challenges to match a person's perceived skills (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). This study does not investigate job satisfaction; rather it investigates the perceptions of flow in the work setting.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow experienced by the skilled professional contract worker.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?
2. To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on the flow conditions?
3. To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience compared to being a permanent worker?

4. To what extent do the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work impact flow when compared to the constraints and benefits of permanent work and its impact on flow?

#### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were used:

*Anxiety*: The psychological state an individual experiences during an activity that is not very challenging and is above individual's perceived skill sets.

*Apathy*: The psychological state an individual experiences during an activity that is not challenging and requires fewer skill sets.

*Boredom*: The psychological state an individual experiences during an activity that is challenging, but not above the individual's perceived skill sets.

*Contract worker*: A term that is synonymous with contingent worker. A contingent worker is defined as "anyone who was in a job currently structured to be of limited duration" (Polivka, 1996, p. 4). The Internal Revenue Service determines someone is an independent contractor if the person for whom the services are being performed has the right to control or direct only the result of the work and not the means and methods of accomplishing the result.

*Flow*: "The psychological state that individuals used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 29). This term is used to describe moments when one is having the best possible experience during an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

*Flow in action:* This is the section of the literature review, which discusses the existence of flow in different work structures and cultural settings.

*In the zone:* This phrase describes the feeling people have during an activity when they are thinking about what they are doing and nothing else. They feel empowered, confident, and in charge. Similar phrases or terms used to describe this feeling are oneness, in the moment, and being present.

*Knowledge:* “Organized sets of principles and facts applying in general domains.” It “represents the acquisition of facts and principles about a domain of information” (O\*Net Resource Center, n.d., para 4).

*Optimal experience:* The inner-state experience that is achieved when a person’s perceived skill sets and challenges are in balance and both are at their highest level for that moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

*Organization complexity:* The intricate interactions between individuals and or groups that occur within the organization and external to the organization.

*Organization politics:* “Organization politics involves those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one’s preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 307).

*Permanent worker:* A term synonymous with full-time employee or employee as defined by the Internal Revenue Service; one who works for an employer 40 hours a week.

*Recruitment list:* The list of potential participants for this study. This list contains former permanent coworkers who became skilled professional contract workers and other

colleagues I have worked with or known who were already skilled professional contract workers.

*Skills:* “Developed capacities that facilitate learning or the more rapid acquisition of knowledge” (O\*Net Resource Center, n.d., para. 4).

*Skilled professional contract worker:* A skilled professional is a worker with a bachelor’s degree or higher with competence in the field of marketing, project management, program management, or information technology. The skilled professional works for a limited duration and only the results of the work can be controlled.

*Social networks:* The personal bonds workers develop with each other while together in the same organization.

#### Limitations

This study was a qualitative research interview study (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) that studied participants’ lived world. It was designed to explore the participants’ lived world related to experiences of flow as contract workers and permanent workers. There were 6 participants in this study and the findings were specific to the participants.

#### Significance

The findings could add to the growing literature on flow. It was anticipated that new concepts would emerge from the qualitative research interview method to identify flow. The qualitative research interview method captures more context about workers’ experiences and activities and there was the potential to identify new information not seen using the experience sampling method. The participants recalled events and

conditions surrounding those events, described in their own words, to uncover new information about flow and the conditions of flow.

This exploration could contribute to existing leadership and management programs in higher education. Insight into a worker's behavior from the worker's perspective could contribute to the existing theories on worker motivation and positive approaches to management and organization development. The results from this study could help those already in leadership and management roles by gaining insight on how to structure the work environment in a way that could support the recruitment and placement of contract workers in situations that may be conducive to learning and growing for the contract workers and the organization. This may contribute to the growth of the contract workers' skills, which could allow them to pursue more challenging activities in an organization. As a result, when contract workers rotate from one organization to another, their knowledge might be shared and developed with other workers in different organizations. This sharing could lead to more creativity and complex learning, which could lead in turn to the innovation of new products and services.

The findings may also contribute to the education of leaders. With the increase in the number of contract workers, leaders may need a better understanding of how to manage them effectively. They may also need education on what motivates contract workers and how to design teams comprised mostly of contract workers. Understanding the differences that may exist between the permanent worker population and the contract worker population may contribute to the leaders' knowledge base when dealing with a diverse worker population.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. This study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow, as experienced by the skilled professional contract worker. This literature review looked at two groups of studies: those on flow and those on contract workers.

### Flow Studies

The purpose of this section is a literature review of Csikszentmihalyi's theoretical framework and its application in daily life. The studies demonstrated the following: (a) flow in action, (b) flow's impact on the quality of the experience, (c) flow's impact on work outcomes, and (d) flow variances. The studies were conducted in structured environments, such as work and school, and conducted with a variety of participants, including female workers, professional workers, blue-collar workers, clerical workers, and students.

### *Flow in Action*

This section demonstrates the existence of flow and its conditions in different work structures and cultural settings. Allison and Duncan (1987) maintained that extant research on work and flow was focused on men and there was limited research done on women. Therefore, they conducted a study on women, work, and flow with the purpose of identifying to what extent working women experienced flow and had a sense of boredom or frustration, the nature of their experiences, and the context of their



experiences. The study was conducted with two groups of working women; 8 professional women from a university and 12 blue-collar factory and service women. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to gather the data. Core descriptions and conditions representing flow and boredom such as challenge, autotelic, and control were read to the participants. After listening to the descriptions and conditions representing flow and boredom, the participants were asked exploratory questions about these conditions in relation to their work.

Allison and Duncan's (1987) findings showed that working women had the same psychological experiences as working men and both groups' challenges-to-skills ratios were in balance. While in flow, both groups felt a sense of mastery and control, a sense of autonomy and freedom, and had experiences of flow when they interacted with others. The professional women experienced a higher frequency of flow at work while the blue-collar women experienced a higher frequency of flow at home and at leisure. The blue-collar women experienced a higher frequency of boredom at work because they felt there was a lack of things to do. The lack of things to do gave them the sense that the actual time on a clock was moving slowly. However, the professional women did not have an awareness of time because they were involved and focused on their activities. The professional women also had a higher sense of challenge and control. The complexity of the professional women's work required them to be creative and focused on the activity.

In an Italian study, Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, and Delle Fave (1988) compared flow in different ecological and cultural environments. Their study examined flow in two different cultural settings using two samples from each cultural setting. The first culture was a traditional cultural setting in which generations lived in the same

community. The first sample wanted to maintain the traditional lifestyle and the second sample was willing to move to a more urban and cosmopolitan setting. The second cultural setting was an urban setting with white-collar workers. The first sample was made up of clerical workers with repetitive tasks that required little responsibility and the second sample was made up of managers who had greater responsibilities. The data were collected using the flow questionnaire, which contained two sections. In the first section participants were given quotations that described flow experiences. Then participants were asked if they had similar experiences, in what context, and were asked to document the frequency of their experiences. In the second section the participants rated the flow activities from the first section using 12 dimensions related to flow.

In the traditional culture, Massimini et al.'s (1988) findings showed the first sample of participants (those wanting to maintain the traditional lifestyle) experienced flow 77% of the time while working and 56% of the flow activities occurred every day. The quality of their flow experiences was higher at work than at leisure. In contrast 68% of the participants in the second sample (those willing to move to a more urban setting) found flow while at leisure, and only 22% of the flow activities occurred every day. The flow experiences at work were higher for the first sample because they perceived their activities were freely chosen and the activities were integrated into parts of their daily lives. The second sample did not perceive their work activities to be freely chosen activities. Unlike the first sample, they felt their activities were requirements of the community.

In the urban culture, Massimini et al.'s (1988) findings showed the clerical workers experienced flow in 5% of their work activities. The managers experienced flow

in 14% of their work. The managers related their jobs more with flow experience than did the clerical workers. The managers “also saw their jobs as significantly more challenging and requiring higher skills” (Massimini et al., 1988, p. 208). The clerical workers who were able to have optimal experiences at work appeared to find flow at work because their personalities were more autotelic: However, 92% of the clerical workers and 70% of the managers associated flow activities with leisure.

### *Flow and the Quality of the Experience*

Flow in action demonstrated the existence of flow in both work and daily life. This section demonstrates the impact of flow on the quality of the experience. Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) conducted a study to answer the following questions: (a) Was the quality of the experience higher when a person was at work or at leisure? (b) Was the quality of the experience different at work and at leisure? and (c) Did occupation affect the quality of the experience? The participants were 139 workers from five large companies in Chicago, of which 107 completed the study. The participants' occupations included management, engineering, clerical, and assembly-line jobs. The experience sampling method was used to collect data on their challenges and skills to determine flow and the participants self-reported their experiences on a questionnaire. The quality of their experiences was measured by the respondents' psychological states. Their psychological states were measured by questions about (a) motivation, (b) activation, (c) concentration, (d) creativity, (e) satisfaction, and (f) affect in the questionnaire.

The findings of Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) showed that the participants spent a great amount of their time in either flow or apathy. In both states there was a

balance between challenges and skills, but flow led to an optimal experience and apathy was a negative experience. Motivation was high when challenges and skills were in balance, whether the experience was optimal or negative; in flow, all six psychological measures were high and in apathy the motivation measure was high. The amount of time spent in flow during work activities was found to be higher than in leisure activities and the quality of the experience was higher during work than in leisure. Lastly, the findings showed that occupation affected the overall quality of the experience and affected the workers' flow experience the most at work. The managers and engineers rated themselves significantly higher on motivation, concentration, and creativity, and also spent more time in flow while working. They had higher action levels, concentrated more intensely, and were more creative than clerical and assembly-line workers.

Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) investigated the effects of flow on the quality of life. They hypothesized that (a) there is a positive relationship between daily subjective experience and perceived levels of challenges and skills, and (b) when in flow the quality of the experience is enhanced. The study was conducted on a sample of 208 talented high-school students to measure daily variations in four dimensions of experience and in four contexts. The dimensions, dependent variables, were (a) concentration, (b) wish to do the activity, (c) involvement, and (d) happiness. Perceived challenges and skills were the predictors. The four contexts were (a) school, (b) with relatives, (c) with friends, and (d) in solitude. The researchers used the experience sampling method and the students completed the questionnaire after each time they received a random signal over a 7-day period.

The findings of Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) showed that the two hypotheses were supported, which was also supported in the Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) study. The quality of experience was confirmed, but there were some contexts where it did not apply. School life showed positive results in all four dimensions. In both the family-life and being-with-friends contexts, there were positive effects in the wish and happiness dimensions. The solitude context showed a positive effect in the concentration and happiness dimensions. This study suggested that the flow model is more applicable to social contexts and activities where achievement plays a dominant role. School provided high levels of challenges and activities for the talented students. School was an environment that allowed the students to use and enhance their skills. The researchers noted it was difficult to predict if these findings could be generalized to talented adults because talented adults may have distinct characteristics that stimulated their experiences.

#### *Flow and Work Outcomes*

Flow in action demonstrated the existence of flow in both work and daily life; however, this section more closely examines flow's impact on the individual's work. Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock, and Randall (2005) studied achievement as it related to flow and work. The researchers hypothesized that flow (a) was strongly associated with positive mood and task interest among achievement-oriented employees and (b) was strongly associated with the willingness to go beyond the job responsibilities, as a result of a positive mood among achievement-oriented employees. Two methods were used in this study. The first method compared the participants' flow activities at work against the average flow of their coworkers. The second method took into account

the influence of the flow experience in a given activity on the flow experience on another activity. Completing the questionnaire were 365 participants from an electronics and appliance retailer. The participants included sales employees and sales-support workers; the tasks they were assigned differed for each group. The findings in the first study showed that achievement-oriented workers experiencing high skills and challenges had greater positive moods and organizational spontaneity than other achievement-oriented workers not experiencing flow. The findings in the second study showed that achievement-oriented workers had greater task interests when they were in flow. However, this did not imply better job performance.

Demerouti (2006) believed there was little evidence that flow can lead to better job performances and introduced the role of conscientiousness. In this study conscientious individuals were considered well-organized, careful, thorough, goal oriented, and hard working. Workers with this trait were expected to turn their work-related flow into higher performance at work. The aim of this study was to examine (a) if the job characteristics identified by Hackman and Oldman (1975) were positively related to flow at work; (b) if employees with high conscientiousness would show a stronger relationship between flow at work and job activities that serve the goal of the organization; and (c) if employees that were high in the conscientious trait would also show a strong relationship between flow at work and job activities that benefit the organization, but not necessarily themselves. The job characteristics identified by Hackman and Oldman (1975) were (a) skill variety, (b) task identity, (c) task significance, (d) autonomy, and (e) feedback. A sample of 113 workers in varying job sectors and roles in the Netherlands participated in this study.

The findings of Demerouti (2006) showed that flow at work was related to job characteristics, but flow at work only resulted in better job performances for employees who had high conscientiousness because they were more goal oriented and hard working. Thus, because a worker was in flow, it did not mean that the worker would perform better at work. The findings also showed that positive emotions only benefited those employees who could direct their emotions toward the right activities, which would lead to positive outcomes.

### *Flow Variances*

This section examines the individual's behavior and its impact on flow. Fullagar and Mills (2008) examined the relationship between flow and motivation with a group of architecture students. The aim of their study was as follows:

- (a) to investigate the relationship between flow and different kinds of motivation;
- (b) to determine if different facets of motivation incrementally added predictive validity to flow; and
- (c) to identify additional moderators of this relation within the context of academic work. (p. 535)

The findings of Fullagar and Mills (2008) showed that self-determined states of motivation, such as the intrinsic motivation to know, to accomplish, and to experience stimulation, were more strongly correlated with flow. Students who studied architecture because of the pleasure and satisfaction they experienced were more likely to be absorbed in their studies. After controlling for intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and the lack of motivation were negatively associated with flow and had a negative impact on optimal experience. Also, after controlling for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the lack of motivation was found to explain a significant variance in flow.

Fullagar and Kelloway (2009) further examined variance in flow by examining the state construct versus the trait construct measures of flow. As defined in their

research, flow as a state construct was behavioral and was defined by the situation, whereas flow as a trait construct was behavior the individual regularly performed regardless of the situation. They hypothesized that there would be more variance in the state construct than in the trait construct because the trait would be more consistent. Hackman and Oldman's (1975) five core job characteristics—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback—were used to validate flow as a psychological state. The study was conducted using the experience sampling methodology with a sample of 40 architecture students engaged in studio work. The data was collected over a 15-week period. The participants used an electronic organizer to enter their information and each submitted a total of 25 trials.

The findings of Fullagar and Kelloway (2009) showed that flow had both state and trait components and the state construct accounted for 74% of the variance in flow. In the individual, there was more variance in the state construct than in the trait construct. This suggested that the flow experience was governed by the task or the situation. The research also found that skill variety and autonomy were the two job characteristics that were significant predictors of flow.

#### *Section Summary*

The literature on flow demonstrated that occupation, the work environment, the complexity of the tasks, autonomy, and motivation had an impact on optimal experience and the quality of the optimal experience. Optimal experience was found to have a higher frequency during work activities than during leisure activities and the quality of the experience was higher (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). The social settings of the work environment also provided more opportunities and



higher levels of challenges and skills than in the nonwork setting (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). More positive optimal experiences also occurred at work when the work activities were complex, required higher skills or a variety of skills were required, the person had a sense of autonomy, and the individual was allowed to be creative during work activities (Allison & Duncan, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Massimini et al., 1988). Those who had optimal experiences at work were also found to be self-motivated and had opportunities to perform different tasks, which were predictors of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Fullagar & Mills, 2008). The lack of motivation and extrinsic motivation were negatively correlated with optimal experience and explained the variation in the flow experience (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). Achievement-oriented individuals had greater task interests and positive moods when they had optimal experiences (Eisenberger et al., 2005). However being an achievement-oriented employee having an optimal experience did not imply the individual performed well at the job. Optimal experiences resulted in better job performance if the individual was achievement-oriented and rated high in conscientiousness (Demerouti, 2006; Eisenberger et al., 2005).

The participants in the literature were students and workers with varied occupations. The literature included an examination of gender differences (Allison & Duncan, 1987), differences between cultural groups (Massimini et al., 1988), and differences between occupations with varying skill sets (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Demerouti, 2006; Eisenberger et al., 2005; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Fullagar & Mills, 2008; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996 ). The literature demonstrated that flow

existed at work. What was lacking in the literature was the impact of flow between different work categories. It was unknown if the perception or frequency of flow was different between nonstandard workers such as contract workers and permanent workers. It was also unknown if there was an impact on flow for individuals when they moved from permanent work to contractor work.

### Contract Workers

The flow literature review illustrated the relationship between flow, internal motivation, and job characteristics and how they contribute to a positive experience at work. Because the purpose of this study is to identify flow at work for contract workers, the purpose of this section of the literature review examines (a) the perception of contract work, (b) contract workers' motivation compared to that of permanent workers, and (c) contract workers' job satisfaction and performances compared to those of permanent workers.

#### *Perception of Contract Work*

This section examines why some workers became contract workers and how some perceive contract work. McKeown (2005) examined professional contract workers who voluntarily moved into contract work because the researcher hypothesized there were limited studies on this population. The aim of the study was to examine the nature and the process of moving from permanent work to contract work. McKeown applied a push/pull dichotomy to identify the reasons for this move. When professionals made the move to contracting by choice, they were drawn by the intrinsic pull of the potential benefits or they were pushed into this work out of necessity. The researcher also included the concept of default to the push/pull dichotomy. In the default concept workers entered

contracting because they were denied standard employment. A sample of 240 participants, 179 males and 61 females, from three contracting agencies completed a surveyed.

The findings of McKeown (2005) showed that, overall, the majority of professionals explained their move as the result of negative experiences in their previous role. Professional contracting was selected for a variety of reasons: (a) job insecurity, (b) to avoid unemployment, (c) as a transitional form of employment to permanent work, and (d) it was a career option. Information technology and engineering professionals supported the notion of contracting because contracting was normal in those occupations. A key factor for information technology and engineering professionals was additional income.

Redpath, Hurst, and Devine (2009) conducted a study examining contract workers' perception of contract work. A total of 47 professional contract workers and 23 managers from five different organizations were interviewed. The interviews were 45 minutes in length comprised of open-ended questions, and were conducted both by telephone and face-to-face. The findings showed that contract workers perceived their work to be a rewarding experience and they enjoyed the opportunity to work in different organizations. They liked the benefit of earning higher wages and having greater autonomy in choosing their work.

However, the study of Redpath et al. (2009) study also exposed the disadvantages of being a contract worker. Despite receiving higher pay, they preferred to have permanent work because their career and financial planning were limited; 62% said training and development opportunities were limited; and 70% believed their financial

planning was challenging because the nature of their work did not allow them to do long-term financial planning. Contract workers could not plan far enough ahead and were not sure when to invest time in their education or improving their skills to further their careers.

### *Contract Worker Motivation*

This literature section compares contract worker and permanent worker motivation. Allan and Sienko (1997) examined both the job characteristics of permanent workers and those of contract workers and their influence on internal motivation. In this study, like the Demerouti (2006) and the Fullagar and Kelloway (2009) studies, the job characteristics of Hackman and Oldman (1975) were used to measure the perception of job attributes and the influence of these attributes on internal motivation and performance. The job description survey was used to collect data on both job characteristics and related subjective elements. The sample of permanent and contract workers consisted of programmers, statistical analysts, engineers, and clerical workers at a national telecommunications company. Of the 395 surveys sent, 197 were returned.

The findings of Allan and Sienko (1997) showed that there was a significant difference in both job and nonjob characteristics, perceptions, and the resulting motivational scores between permanent and contract workers. Contract workers reported higher results in task identity and feedback. The researchers attributed those results to either that the task given to contract workers provided them with more feedback about their performance or that their perception was influenced by their previous jobs, which lacked these characteristics. Contract workers also scored higher on knowledge results and combined growth need. Contract workers also had higher motivational scores.

### *Contract Worker Job Satisfaction and Job Performance*

The previous two sections discussed what it meant to be a contract worker and what motivated one while being a contract worker. This section examines the relationships between contract work and both job performance and job satisfaction. The next study revealed how skill sets contributed to contract workers' job satisfaction and job performance. Moshavi and Terborg (2002) examined the difference between contract customer-service representatives and permanent customers-service representatives' job satisfaction and performance. They believed contract-work studies ignored individuals' productive skills, talents, and knowledge. The researchers hypothesized that the differences in human capital between permanent and contract customer-service representatives can explain the differences in their job satisfaction and performance. A questionnaire was sent to the 600 customer-service representatives working at a retail clothing mail-order catalog company. Questionnaires were also sent to their customers; 76 contract and 60 permanent employees completed the survey, and 234 customers responded to the questionnaire.

The findings of Moshavi and Terborg (2002) showed that contract customer-service representatives rated themselves higher in job satisfaction than permanent customer-service representatives. However, customers rated the permanent customer-service representatives' performance better than the contract customer-service representatives. Because the contract customer-service representatives had lower skill sets, less was expected of them and they were not as motivated. Therefore, the contract customer-service representatives were satisfied with the tasks they were given. The

researchers proposed opportunities for further research in which contract workers have more skill sets.

Dickson and Lorenz (2009) examined job satisfaction among temporary and part-time employees. The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between job satisfaction and psychological empowerment, defined by Spreitzer's four cognitions of meaningfulness, competence, choice, and impact. Online surveys were submitted to a random sample of on- and off-campus students aged 18 to 30 from a Midwestern university. There were a total of 397 usable surveys for the study.

The findings of Dickson and Lorenz (2009) showed that both the meaning cognition and the impact cognition of psychological empowerment were positively associated with job satisfaction for temporary and part-time nonstandard workers. The workers reported higher satisfaction when their work goals aligned with their own ideals and standards and when they had the opportunity to influence their operational outcomes at work. The choice cognition and competence cognition of psychological empowerment were negatively associated with job satisfaction. Workers did not expect significant control over how their work was done and felt they were already competent and could perform their tasks.

#### *Section Summary*

The literature on contract workers demonstrated contract workers entered this work category for a variety of reasons such as previous job insecurities, job transition, new career option, and more money (McKeown, 2005). Professional contractors described contracting as a rewarding experience: they liked having the opportunities to work with different organizations, and having the autonomy of choosing their own work

(Redpath et al., 2009). Contractors rated their job satisfaction higher than that of permanent workers (Moshavi & Terborg, 2002) and satisfaction was higher when their work goals aligned with their own ideals and they had influence over the task outcomes (Dickson & Lorenz, 2009). Contractors with a high need for growth and a need for the knowledge of the results of their work had positive alignment between their skills, the tasks, and the feedback they received, which positively influenced their motivation (Allan & Sienko, 1997; Dickson & Lorenz, 2009). They were more motivated than permanent workers. However, contractors with lower skill sets were not as motivated because they believed much was not expected of them (Moshavi & Terborg, 2002).

Although contractors believed their career and financial planning was limited (Redpath et al., 2009), they did exhibit the conditions for flow at work: (a) being confronted with tasks they have a chance of completing, (b) clear goals, (c) receiving feedback, and (d) an autotelic personality. Another quality contractors exhibited that predicts flow was self-motivation. The research, however, was limited in making the connections between these conditions and being in a flow state as a contract worker, the extent contract workers' optimal experience had on their work outcomes such as job performance and satisfaction, and the extent the experience of flow varied between permanent workers and contract workers.

#### Summary of the Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the impact on their flow experiences as a result of moving from permanent work to contract work and the impact on flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi

(1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), on their work as skilled professional contract workers.

The flow studies in this literature review investigated Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow: that flow can be found in different social and work settings, and that individuals with different skill sets can have flow experiences. On further review of the flow literature, the flow model was more applicable to complex social structures and settings where achievement played a dominant role. The work setting provided both the complex social structure and the need for achievement for the flow model. The frequency and the quality of flow were higher for individuals involved in more complex activities requiring complex skill sets. Well-placed workers demonstrated (a) they had better quality experiences of flow, (b) they were more motivated to take on more complex work, (c) they were more creative, and (d) they had better concentration, which led to greater satisfaction. The literature on contract workers showed evidence that the conditions for flow existed: (a) task significance, (b) clear goals, (c) receiving feedback, (d) autotelic personality, (e) complex skills, (f) autonomy, and (g) motivation. Contract workers were also viewed as achievement-oriented workers because they were high in task identity and feedback.

One gap between the flow and contract literature was the absence of an exploration of the impact on flow when the worker moved from permanent work to contract work. Both the flow and contract literature demonstrated experiences of flow for both permanent workers and contract workers; however the impact on the individual's experience and quality of flow during the move was not examined. Another gap in the flow literature was not examining the impact contract work had on the contract workers'



experiences of flow. The flow literature demonstrated the existence of flow, but it was not known if the contract-work or the permanent-work setting had an impact on flow. The findings showed that contract workers had higher job satisfaction than permanent workers and contract work was rewarding, but contractors preferred to have the benefits of permanent workers. The constraints of being a contract worker, such as limited financial planning and career development, may impact flow. There was a lack of understanding of the extent to which skilled professional contract workers had experiences of flow and how contract work impacted their quality of work and their motivation when compared to their experiences as permanent workers.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow experienced by skilled professional contract workers.

### Research Design

The overall design of this study was a qualitative research interview study (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There were two semi-structured interviews that were guided by the Interview Protocol shown in Appendix C, which contained the covered topics and suggested questions that “structure the course of the interview” (Kvale & Brinkmann, p. 130). The Interview Protocol in Appendix C shows the relationship between the interview questions and the research questions. Appendix D was included to show the relationship between the research questions and the flow conditions and concepts. The semi-structured interviews provided the setting for a conversation with the end goal of gaining knowledge about the participants’ perceived flow and optimal experiences at work both as permanent workers and contract workers. The participants were 6 skilled professional contract workers who were formerly permanent workers. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and content analysis was used to examine the interview responses. The examination of the interview responses attempted

to understand the impact on flow and the flow conditions as skilled professionals transitioned from permanent work to contract work.

## Participants

### *Participant Recruitment Process*

The selection of skilled professional contract workers for this study was a convenience sample because I had maintained relationships with colleagues who were once permanent workers then became skilled professional contract workers, and I had also maintained contact with other skilled professional contract workers. The recruitment list contained 45 names of which 48% of the potential participants were male and 52% of the potential participants were female. The recruitment list was also comprised of 70% White potential participants and 30% non-White potential participants. The potential participants came from various ethnic, religious, and industry or career backgrounds. Although the percentage of White skilled professional contract workers was higher, the impact of race, gender, or ethnic background on flow experiences was not the focus of this study. Similarly, it had been demonstrated in prior research (Allison & Duncan, 1987) that working women had the same psychological experiences as working men.

The participant-recruitment process was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I solicited participants willing to be in this study. In the second phase, I qualified the willing potential participants for this study. The goal was to have a total of 8 to 10 participants in this study. After exhausting the recruitment list and concluding Phase 2, I was able to qualify 8 participants for this study. However, because of heavy work schedules I only had of the 8 qualified participants 6 participants in this study.

### *Phase I Participant Solicitation*

In Phase 1 of the participant recruitment, I alphabetized the recruitment list by last name, then used the random numbers functionality in Microsoft Excel to generate a list of 45 random numbers between 1 and 45. The random numbers were assigned to each name in the order they were generated. The first 10 numbers were selected from the recruitment list in chronological order. If the selected name had an e-mail address, then the participant received the Participant Consent E-mail (see Appendix E). The Participant Consent E-mail was an introductory e-mail soliciting volunteers for the qualitative research interview (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). If the selected name did not have an e-mail address, then I contacted the potential participant by telephone and used the Participant Consent E-mail as my telephone script. If the selected name did not have either an e-mail address or an active phone number, then I removed the contact name from the recruitment list and selected the next sequential random number on the list. After I contacted the potential participants, they notified me either by e-mail or by telephone to confirm their participation in this study. I repeated the first phase until I received confirmation from 10 potential participants.

### *Phase II Participant validation*

Whereas potential participants were being solicited in Phase 1, Phase 2 commenced once consent was received from a potential participant. After I received the e-mail or telephone confirmation, I scheduled a preliminary telephone interview and used the Participant Screening Questions (see Appendix F) to confirm whether the potential participants qualified to participate in this study. Some of the potential participants were

disqualified for several reasons such as the lack of contractor experiences or the lack of permanent worker experiences.

### *Interview Sites*

Interview locations and times were selected by the participants. However, because the interviews were recorded, my only criterion was that the location be relatively quiet. Francis and Lucy scheduled the interviews at their homes. Larry, Ken, and Martha scheduled the interviews at their offices, either before the work day started or during lunch. Troy scheduled the interviews at a hotel lounge near his office.

### *Participant Criteria*

To qualify, the participants needed to have flow experiences while working as skilled professional contract workers. The participants had at minimum a bachelor's degree and 3 years working experience consisting of at least 2 years of experience as a permanent worker and 1 year experience as a contract worker. The participants also needed competency in the field of marketing, project management, program management, or information technology.

The study started with 8 participants all of whom were working over 40 hours a week. The first interview times and dates were scheduled and later during the study 2 participants withdrew because of their heavy work schedules and the inability to reschedule the interview times. I went back to the recruitment list, using only the names of the contractors I did not solicit, and repeated the recruitment process. Unfortunately, either the solicited participants did not respond or they did not have the time to participate in the study. Only 6 participants were able to complete the study.

### *Participant Summary*

This section provides a summary about the participants. Their profiles are outlined in the Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Table 1

#### *Participant Profile*

Pseudonym	Gender	Degree	Professional skill	Years as a permanent worker	Last employed as a permanent worker	Years as a contract worker
Troy	Male	Bachelors	Information Technology Project Management	5	2006	6
Larry	Male	Bachelors	Information Technology Project Management	9	2006	9
Ken	Male	Bachelors	Information Technology	20	2008	2
Francis	Female	Bachelors	Project Management	16	2005	5
Lucy	Female	MBA	Marketing	18	2007	10
Martha	Female	MBA	Marketing	22	2007	2

*Note.* MBA = Master's of Business Administration.

Gender was not a factor in this study but it was interesting to note that there was an even number of males and females. Lucy and Martha had very similar characteristics. They were both female, the only participants with a Master's of Business Administration, both were marketing skilled professionals, and they also had the highest numbers of years working as permanent workers. Troy and Larry were both project-management and information-technology skilled professionals. The remaining 2 participants, Ken and Francis, were skilled information-technology and project-management professionals respectively. The years of professional experience as a permanent and a contract worker

varied, and met the qualifications for the study. The remaining sections provide additional details about the participants.

### *Troy*

Troy was the youngest participant and the most analytical of the group. His background was in project management and information technology. Troy worked for a software company that employed both permanent and contract workers and he had the opportunity to do both in the same company. Troy started as a permanent worker and moved to contract work because, as he stated, “I did that particular move because I wanted a more challenging job.”

With assistance from the Vice President of Consulting, he transitioned to contract work. He later became an independent contract worker and contracted with outside agencies to find work. He made this transition from the software company after conducting a cost–benefit comparison between being an independent contract worker and a permanent worker, and contract work proved to be the better financial option. At the time of this study, Troy worked in San Francisco Mondays through Thursdays, flew home to San Diego on Thursday evenings, and worked from home on Fridays.

### *Larry*

Since leaving the military, Larry worked in information technology, performing various project-manager roles. During that time Larry went back and forth between contract and permanent work. In 1989 Larry started contracting because at that time the pay was very lucrative. He grew up in a family where one always had to do their best and try hard. He recalled his family’s comments,

...you have to shine by any means necessary...

Larry's family beliefs shaped his decisions and choices at work, which will be discussed later in the study.

*Ken*

Ken was a laid-off permanent worker and was the only participant who started contracting because he could not find permanent work. Ken stated,

...I was looking for work full-time, there's not a lot of full-time opportunities... So it was just through basically having kind of I would say, quite honestly, struggling to find full-time work...

Ken's background was in information technology and he had more than 10 years of experience as a senior manager.

*Francis*

Francis' background was in talent management in the information-technology industry. Francis chose contract work because she was bored with permanent work and contract work provided her with a variety of opportunities at work. She stated,

The job market would be one reason. Also, you get bored in a job. So contracting allows you access to other organizations, other functions, and people.

Francis was doing contract work, but within 2 months after her last interview she began working full-time for a consulting firm because that particular work felt like contract work; that is although she had one employer, she moved from project to project in different organizations.

*Lucy*

Lucy was the oldest of the participants and had many years of experience in marketing. She seemed to enjoy her work but had reached a point in her life when she did not need to work as much as she used to in her youth. Lucy stated,

So it was good because at that time I was trying to shift on a personal level saying, "You know I can't be this workaholic anymore. I'm going to get balance."



*Martha*

Martha seemed to be the most serious of all the participants. Martha was a well-respected senior marketing professional in her industry. She believed she worked hard to get to that level as a permanent worker and she wanted to maintain her credibility in the industry. She took pride in her contract work and believed she had something to offer after having years of experience in her senior role as a permanent worker.

She was a very competitive person and always liked being the first to create something that did not exist. Martha's personal drive and pride in her work contributed to being listed as one of the inventors on a patent for a product she developed. Both interviews were conducted at Martha's place of work.

*Ethics in Research*

During the preliminary telephone interview I set up a face-to-face meeting to present the participants with the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G) and to answer any questions about the study. The Informed Consent Form informed the participants of the following: (a) the purpose of the study; (b) the procedures; (c) the participant's rights; and (d) the benefits and costs of participating in the study.

I was the only researcher with access to the participants' personal information and I was the only researcher transcribing the participants' interviews. The participants' identity was kept confidential at all times, including the research findings, by using pseudonyms. As the researcher, I also ensured that the findings were documented as accurately as possible by providing the participants a chance to review the transcript summary and to provide their feedback. These procedures were approved by the

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (see Appendix H).

### Instrumentation

#### *Participant Screening Questions*

The participants had to meet certain criteria before taking part in the study. I conducted a preliminary telephone interview using the Participant Screening Questions (see Appendix F) to confirm if they had the following: (a) experiences of flow as skilled professional contract workers, (b) the required amount of working experience, (c) the technical competencies both as skilled professional contract workers and permanent workers, and (d) had the educational background to qualify for this study.

#### *Interview Protocol*

Data collection was conducted during the two face-to-face interviews. From these interviews I acquired knowledge about the participants' perceived experiences of flow as skilled professional contract workers and permanent workers. Kvale (1996) noted that "the purpose of the qualitative research interview ... is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 30). The Interview Protocol (see Appendix C) guided the face-to-face interviews to obtain the descriptions of the participants' lived world as skilled professional contract workers and permanent workers. The Interview Protocol was similar to a prepared script which "structures the course of the interview more or less tightly" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). It outlined the topics and suggested questions related to the research questions. During the first interview session the Interview Protocol was sometimes adhered to closely. Follow-up questioning of the

interviewees were conducted to understand new phenomenon being expressed during the interview.

The Interview Protocol was created based on Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989) theory of flow, flow studies, and the experience sampling method. Many studies, including those in the literature review, supported the flow theory and the conditions of flow; some researchers used a combination of the experience sampling method and interviewing to gather data. The experience sampling method provided a representative sample of a person's everyday situation and related experiences and activities (Hormuth, 1986). It provided Csikszentmihalyi with a snapshot of an experience and captured emotions and activities simultaneously while analyzing daily fluctuations in a person's experience. Unlike the experience sampling method, research interviews captured more than just a moment in time or a snapshot of temporal space. Research interviews explored the interviewees' lived world through the interviewees' words (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

#### *Interview Summary Cover Letter*

After the first face-to-face interviews were conducted, a summary of the interview results was sent to the participants. The Interview Summary Cover Letter (see Appendix D) was the first page of the summary results; it instructed participants to (a) change any words or statements they believe better represent their responses during the interview, (b) strike out any words or statements they believe did not represent their responses during the interview, and (c) add any words or statements they believe that were not included in the summary. The Interview Summary Cover Letter also reminded the participants to

verify the accuracy of the information and that they were represented fairly during the interview session. The Interview Summary Cover Letter also served as a reminder to participants that they may be asked additional questions for clarification during the second interview session.

### *Background of Researcher*

I have worked for 10 years in the financial-services industry and have watched unfulfilled employees come and gone. Therefore, I decided to start talking to them about their experiences at work and I listened. I learned that there was so much more that these employees could do; they were bored or in the wrong role. As a student in the doctoral program in the Department of Organization and Leadership at the University of San Francisco, I was introduced to Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow and optimal experience and became an avid reader of Csikszentmihalyi's work. Since then, I have tried to find ways to find flow at work.

My doctoral-student experience in qualitative research includes taking courses in Research Methods and Content Analysis, and taking independent study courses in Experience Sampling and Content Analysis. My past work experiences as a permanent worker and my current role as a skilled professional contractor allowed me to listen for and observe hidden meanings in the language participants used to describe flow in their work activities. This enabled me to ask more probing questions and be empathetic during the conversation. However, my past experiences also formulated my biases about certain concepts and my personal constructs about contract and permanent work. I was aware of both and endeavored to be present with the interviewee and open to new phenomenon that could be extracted from the data.

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using the following steps. First, there was as a face-to-face interview which lasted about 50 minutes in length. Digital-recording and note-taking methods were used for this study (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Because interviews were not video recorded, note taking was important to record body language and other nuances that could not be captured during the recordings. The Interview Protocol (see Appendix C) was used to guide the interview session. Second, after completing the first interviews, I transcribed them within 7 days and mailed a summary of the interview along with the Interview Summary Cover Letter (see Appendix I) to participants. Third, participants reviewed the summary, made their edits, and returned the documents. Fourth, a second face-to-face interview was conducted, about 20 minutes in length, to review the participants' feedback and ask clarifying questions. Digital recording and note taking were also used to record the second face-to-face interview. Finally, I updated the Interview Summary based on the participants' feedback during the second interview.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts, interview summaries, and the interview notes. First, I transcribed both interview recordings and included notes in the transcripts. These notes came from the interview summaries, the participant feedback, and my notes taken during the interviews. The transcripts were saved in a research file on my laptop computer as Transcripts Version 1. Second, I coded and categorized the data twice. The codes "are immediate, are short, and define the action or experience described" by the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 202).

Categories were created from the emergent data to identify themes. Categorization involved reducing the meaning of long interview statements to a few simple categories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Neuendorf, 2002). When a code or a category was identified, the surrounding text was highlighted and both the line number and the aggregated count of the codes were documented. Once the coding and categorization was completed I saved the data as Coding Version 1 under my research folder and I did not look at it for 7 days. Beginning on the 8th day, I used Version 1 of the transcripts and recoded and recategorized the data. This was saved in my research folder as Coding Version 2. I looked for any discrepancies between Coding Version 1 and Coding Version 2. When there were some discrepancies, I went back to the digital recordings and the transcripts to resolve the discrepancies, and documented the resolution in the findings. The final step in the data analysis was to examine the coded data and the categories and to examine their relationship to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work. The study investigated the relationship between contract work and flow compared to the relationship between permanent work and flow as experienced by the skilled professional contract worker. This chapter explores the research questions relative to the participants' lived world as both a skilled professional contract worker and a permanent worker.

This study sought to answer the following questions

1. To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?
2. To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on the flow conditions?
3. To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience as compared to being a permanent worker?
4. To what extent do the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work impact flow when compared to the constraints and benefits of permanent work and its impact on flow?

The findings for each research question is represented by a section in this chapter; sections are labeled as (a) Extent of Perceived Experience of Flow, (b) Working and External Conditions' Impact on Flow, (c) Worker Quality Impact on Flow, and (d)

Constraints and Benefits Impact on Flow. The sections align with the above research questions.

#### Research Question 1: Extent of Perceived Experience of Flow

All the participants, except Larry, had perceived experiences of flow as both contract workers and permanent workers. Larry only had perceived experiences of flow as a contract worker. Troy and Lucy had more frequent experiences of flow as contract workers when compared to their permanent worker experiences of flow. Francis' experiences of flow occurred with the same frequencies as both a contract worker and a permanent worker. Ken and Martha each had 2 years experience as contract workers, the least of all the participants, and 20 years or more of experience as permanent workers, the most of all the participants. They were able to recall experiences of flow as contract workers, but not to the extent they had as permanent workers, perhaps due to the amount of time spent as permanent workers versus the amount of time spent as contract workers.

Larry perceived he was provided with frequent experiences of flow only as a contract worker. He stated,

I would almost say just about every contractor position I've been on has been some type of project where I'm in that particular zone.

Although Larry converted from contract work to permanent work several times, permanent work did not give him as much enjoyment as contract work and he lacked vigor when he became a permanent worker. Larry stated,

You know, I have a harder time, for some reason, getting excited about a lot of things when I'm full-time. ... And for me, again, a lot of my contracting jobs had turned into full-time jobs, thus the impression was, before we hire him we have to go out here and be tested and true. And so all of a sudden I was tested and true ... I passed the muster. ... but I don't have that same—it's not that same—type of drive, it's not that same type of fire.



He did so well as a contract worker that he was offered jobs as a permanent worker. Although the work was the same, once he became a permanent worker his perceived experience at work changed. The motivation he had as a contract worker was no longer present and his desire to do well as a permanent worker was not as high when compared to when he was a contract worker.

Troy liked permanent work, but his experiences of flow as a permanent worker were not as frequent and to the degree of excitement he had as a contract worker. He said,

But I think they're [permanent worker experiences of flow are] fewer and farther in between. ... Well, I did enjoy it [permanent work] very much, but I didn't work like crazy hours. ... Like I really like the stress and the like a couple weeks before and all the deployment steps, I really; that's my favorite part. And that's usually when I work like 80 or 90 hours a week.

Troy did not seem excited when he described his permanent-worker experiences of flow. He was nonchalant while describing his permanent-worker experiences.

However, he smiled and laughed more when he discussed his contract-worker experiences. During that time he was more engaged and seemed more relaxed. I asked him why he became a contract worker, and he responded,

I did that particular move because I wanted a more challenging job.

Being a contract worker provided him with more frequent opportunities for flow and a different level of excitement he did not receive as a permanent worker.

Lucy worked as both a permanent and a contract worker and earlier in her career her perceived experiences of flow for both were about the same. However, at the time of this study, Lucy was at a time in her career where she was focused on having a work-life balance and denounced her self-proclaimed workaholic personality. Later in her career she therefore perceived herself to have more frequent experiences of flow as a contract worker, perhaps resulting from trying to achieve this balance.

Lucy was animated and very excited when she described her most memorable permanent worker experience earlier in her career. During this experience, Lucy had the opportunity to transfer her skills to an industry where she had no experience and built something that was not created before. She affirmed,

When I did that, because this industry really lacked good marketing skills, I brought it in and I was like the Girl Wonder. It was great. Again, just fabulous, fabulous.

Lucy perceived she had the skills to meet the perceived challenges in a new industry. As Lucy progressed in her career, she wanted more stability in her life and accepted less challenging permanent work. She did not show as much excitement when she discussed her permanent worker experiences from later in her career. She stated,

So it was good because at that time I was trying to shift on a personal level saying, “You know I can’t be this workaholic anymore. I’m going to get balance.” So I thought, “One of the ways,” silly me, “One of the ways to get balance would be take a job that I could do with my eyes closed.” ... So I sort of thought, “Okay, my thought was to have a job that was so easy,” and the reality is that I probably worked maybe two hours a day on this job. I mean I was doing everything from planning my wedding, planning my husband’s birthday...

Her last permanent worker role was her least exciting. She added,

I figure part of the issue was I didn’t want to work long hours. I didn’t want to be stressed out. I was trying to turn a new leaf but at the same time because there was so much shit that went on there between some of the people—you know—you just get to the point where it’s ridiculous. It’s just—it was disgusting actually. So for me it was like, “Okay, I’m not going to put my heart and soul in this because there’s so many crappy people around that just want to” ... I don’t know.

Lucy reflected and realized that working less hours and performing less demanding work did not present her with the work–life balance she sought. Performing work without passion or emotion presented her with less frequent experiences of flow as a permanent worker. The more Lucy described her permanent-worker experiences from

later in her career her body movement seemed less energetic and her voice became hollow.

Lucy was consistently energetic while discussing her experiences of flow as a contract worker throughout her career. During this study, Lucy engaged in contract-worker opportunities, establishing a connection between her skills and what the organization needed. As a contract worker, Lucy felt she was making a difference by giving back to the organization and by doing work that was meaningful. She described,

For example, in the publishing company they really need help with marketing and I thought one gal when I was meeting with her we ended up having this two hour meeting. I thought she was going to cry with joy that I was there because finally, she felt like somebody understood marketing, somebody really understood what she's doing and her boss who's the one that hired me is the first to admit she doesn't know marketing. So it's like I feel like at this point in my life I want to give back. ... I want to help people. I want to help companies. I mean obviously if I'm going to put myself into it I'm going to probably not do it for free but like I said the motivation for me is not the money. The money's always there but it's just really helping companies and doing what I love to do and what I feel I'm good at.

Lucy's perceived experiences of flow as a contract worker were more frequent and more meaningful as her marketing career progressed.

Both Ken and Martha experienced flow as permanent workers and contract workers, but they had higher frequencies of flow as permanent workers. As permanent workers, they were very senior managers, each with 20 or more years of experience, where they took part in more strategic and less tactical aspects of an activity. At the time of this study, they were contract workers for 2 years. Being in a less demanding and less visible role was new for them. Their experiences of flow as contract workers required them to reuse skills they acquired earlier in their careers that remained dormant until they became contract workers. Ken called the application of his old skills "survivor skills" and

used the analogy of playing tennis again after a brief retirement to describe his use of this phrase. He explained,

It's almost like survivor skills, a little bit in a sense ...

He continued to state,

... it definitely made me reach into a lot of—go back to a lot of—the basics I had learned over the years. ... I used to play tennis in high school and college. And I didn't, and then I stopped playing for like ten years, and then when I picked the racket back up, you were really rusty. But then—once you get—once you warm up and you loosen up and you kind of get in the rhythm and you listen to those voices in the back or your heads, it's like, "Do this. Do that." And you kind of get into—you get back into it, right?

As a contract worker, Martha used skills she had seen others use, skills she had used to a lesser degree when she was a permanent worker. She said,

I think it was challenging for me personally being on the channel side [marketing term meaning the venue used to promote and sell to customers] because that was my first exposure to being a channel partner versus a business partner, and secondly, while I had responsibilities at varying levels throughout my financial services career, in a development function, product development where I had been exposed to a lot of the same processes, the whole software development life cycle development process, I'd be exposed to that but from a different vantage point. While that wasn't new to me, the degree to which I had to manage that was much more deep than what I had done for many years.

The contract-worker role required Ken and Martha to focus on tactical tasks instead of being more involved with strategies. The novelty of their new role as a contract worker required them to get acclimated to this new environment before more frequent experiences of flow could occur.

The findings demonstrated workers having experiences of flow as both a permanent worker and a skilled professional contract worker. The next section will examine the extent the conditions of skilled professional contract work had an impact on the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on flow conditions.

## Research Question 2: Working Conditions' Impact on Flow

The conditions of flow such as (a) control, (b) autonomy, and (c) concentration were present during the study. However, there were other conditions that existed as a contract worker and permanent worker, which had an impact on the experience of flow. These conditions provided the participants with either positive or negative experiences either because the conditions existed or there was a lack of them. This section will discuss those: (a) flow conditions, (b) organization complexity, (c) organization politics, (d) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (e) expert-community support, and (f) the participants' perception of a contract worker.

### *Flow Conditions*

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996, 1997) identified nine conditions of flow that were present in the study both for contract workers and permanent workers. The flow conditions according to the theory of flow are reviewed in relation to the findings.

### *Perceived Balance Between Challenges and Skills*

The theory of flow predicts that experiences will be most positive when there are enough opportunities for challenges to match a person's perceived skills; in other words there will be a positive balance between challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) stated "flow seems to occur only when tasks are within one's ability to perform" (p. 39). The participants perceived they had skills to meet the challenges presented to them as both contract workers and permanent workers. In this study the participants used several statements to convey their perceived balance between their skills and the challenges they

encountered. Lucy asserted,

I mean it was just right up my alley. ... I thought I brought a really good skill set, very good discipline into the organization.

Francis confirmed,

It's more of, "I know what I'm doing," kind of thing. So I wouldn't say it's a level of expertise, but it's confidence in my knowledge, right, and what I do.

Ken maintained,

It definitely made me reach into a lot of—go back to a lot—of the basics I had learned over the years.

Martha realized,

It [the experience of flow] was just similar to other challenges where I basically had to figure out what was the right way to do it.

Commonly used phrases, adjectives, and symbols were used to describe their experiences of flow such as excited, confident, fabulous, great, positive, fun, involved, and invested. Other participants used more powerful phrases to describe their experiences of flow and their emotions at that moment in time. Lucy cited earlier,

... I brought it in and I was like the Girl Wonder.

Larry indicated,

I felt like I was watching the space shuttle go off or something. ... I would almost say just about every contractor position I've been on has been some type of project where I'm in that particular zone. ... it was an adrenaline rush.

Ken affirmed,

... it's like there's kind of like an adrenaline rush.

### *Action Awareness Merging and Concentration*

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) theorized when individuals are in flow there is a merging of action and awareness. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) defined awareness as the following:

We shall use “awareness” to designate all those processes that take place in consciousness after a bit of information is attended to. It includes such steps as recognizing the stimulus, categorizing it in terms of previous information, and disposing of it either by preserving it in memory or by forgetting it. (p. 19)

During the experiences of flow, there were stimuli in the activity that focused the participants’ attention and allowed them to use the skills they acquired throughout their careers. In this moment, they were conscious of their actions, which included complex routine steps relative to the flow activity, but they were not conscious of the awareness itself. They were not conscious of recalling and processing the information in a manner appropriate for the activity; the awareness seemed to occur naturally. The merging of their action and awareness was possible when the participants paid attention and concentrated on their activities; there was little distraction.

The participants in this study demonstrated the merging of their action and awareness, and concentration on their activities both as contract workers and permanent workers. This required the participants to pay attention to their actions and to not become distracted by outside stimuli.

Troy stated,

... so definitely when I’m running a project like that it’s very, very, very focused ... you try to understand the business problems and find a way to creatively solve the problem.

Larry reflected,

I was so mesmerized at the time that it [the experience of flow] took off the focus [from his fears] for just a second just to say, “Let me check these systems.” And so then, you know, I think I went into, you know, action mode. And I think that was the part of it, to where all of a sudden I stood up and I start calling out to these different groups, you know, who were on this call, “Check this. Check this. Check this. Check this. Check” ... and it had been something that I had planned in my brain for so long, that we had gone over so long, that I thought that I would be looking at my project plan to say—it was just second-nature—to check all of these things.

Larry's statement demonstrated the holistic connection between perceived skills and challenges, the merging of action and awareness, and concentration. Larry believed he had the skills to accomplish the task and once the moment presented itself, he focused on his actions and the execution seemed effortless.

However, Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) noted that individuals have a limited ability to maintain concentration for long periods of time and hence there is a limit to the experience of flow. When the connection between action and awareness no longer existed, and there was a loss of concentration; the participants paid attention to other stimuli. During those moments, the participants allowed other stimuli into their focus and concentrated on other aspects of the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) explained, "these interruptions occur when questions flash through the actor's mind: 'Am I doing well?' 'What am I doing here?' 'Should I be doing this?' When one is in a flow episode, these questions simply do not come to mind" (p. 38). At that moment the activity does not seem achievable.

When Larry did not maintain flow he described experiences of anxiety as a contract worker. Larry stated,

And I never really started thinking about it until the last five minutes [before the experience of flow], "What if this really fails?" ... And this is how it affected me personally, because every time I heard anyone emphasizing so much on contingency, and this might've been just my own personal opinion, I kept thinking that they were saying, "This is not going to work. He is going to fail." Right? And that was what I took from this personally.

As a contract worker, Larry reflected several times between his experiences of flow and during this time he experienced fear of failure. However, his reflection provided a different view of his work and his perception of what he was capable of doing. This



motivated him to concentrate and take on the more complex activity. He related,

So as everyone was so focused on contingency and the fact of this failing, I think it drove me harder to make sure that what I was doing was the right thing and trying to keep, you know, dotting my Is and crossing my Ts.

Larry's fear of failing was an example of what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) called "spurious motivational element" (p. 42). This stimulus did not come from the participants' intrinsic desire to initially become involved in the activity. The motivation to become involved came from fear, which eventually led to the intrinsic involvement in the activity. This stimulus was from the external environment and it was allowed into the participant's conscious because the concentration and the merge of action and awareness required for flow did not exist. This was an external stimulus that could encourage individuals to participate in flow activities, limit their distractions, and become intrinsically involved in the activity, as it did for Larry, or it could deter individuals from becoming involved in flow activities. This concept of a "spurious motivational element" as a contributor to the experience of flow also emerged during discussions with Ken and Troy.

Stress and fear of failure were external stimuli that contributed to Troy's experience of flow as a contract worker and Ken's experience of flow as a permanent worker. During the stressful moment Ken described,

'Cause then it's something new, but it's also something like, "Wow, let's come on. Let's get together and start a new set of challenges", plus frustrations and all that, of course. That goes along with it. But it's like it's in addition to keeping the lights on. But then you have this other layer of—now you have to have—there's more work, right? ... Which is fine. But at the same time, the stress level and everything else goes up as well. ... Cause you wanted this opportunity 'cause this was nobody else was having sort of an opportunity like this. So the last thing I wanted to do was—or we, I should say—was fail or disappoint or whatever, 'cause then we may not get another chance like this, you know?

Troy stated,

Like I really like the stress and the like a couple weeks before and all the deployment steps, I really; that's my favorite part. And that's usually when I work like 80 or 90 hours a week.

*Loss of Awareness of Self*

During the experiences of flow the individuals' "... 'self-ish' considerations become irrelevant" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 42) because they are so immersed in the activity and at times interacting with others that they have lost their own identity. Larry's contract worker experience of flow is an example of this condition. Earlier, Larry stated,

I was so mesmerized at the time that it [the experience of flow] took off the focus [from his fears] for just a second just to say, "Let me check these systems." And so then, you know, I think I went into, you know, action mode. And I think that was the part of it, to where all of a sudden I stood up and I start calling out to these different groups, you know, who were on this call, "Check this. Check this. Check this. Check this. Check" ... and it had been something that I had planned in my brain for so long, that we had gone over so long, that I thought that I would be looking at my project plan to say—it was just second-nature—to check all of these things.

He continued to state,

... So that was kind of the whole thing. And as we went through and everything had check-offs and we ran files and we made sure that things were working and we looked at the clocks and the clocks weren't having weird times, we realized that everything that we had planned and executed and it worked.

That moment was not about Larry, it was about making sure everyone knew their part and to make sure at midnight January 1, 2000, the computer systems were working as planned. It was not until after the moment passed that Larry started to think about himself and his emotions. He explained,

You know, and then everyone was saying, you know, here was the thing, it took them a minute I think for them to say, "Larry, good job." They were looking at each other going, you know, kind of, "It really worked?" Right? ... And so then I was then just being human in a sense of "I did this." Now at that point I'm mad because now these naysayers doubted me. So of course at that point I was kind of like the new dawn in *The Godfather*, come over and kiss the ring, right?... That's

what I wanted, because I wanted them to realize that this was something, we had done this, and for all of the stuff that they had done, you know, I had done something. And I wanted to take some type of kind of—I wanted them to have some type of personal appreciation for what I had done. And that didn't really happen.

He later added,

But sometimes they say sometimes either a word or an expression is worth 1,000 ... I could look at their faces and see, right, where they had to turn around and have a certain level of respect, and that caught me kind of off-guard, my emotion. And so before I became emotional in front of them I had to kind of really take myself out of the room and then compose myself and be like, "That was nothing." Right?

This finding suggested that in order for flow to occur, the ego cannot be the focus of attention. When the ego required attention and there was a desire for some extrinsic reward, then attention could not be given to the activity.

#### *Clarity in Goals and Feedback*

In flow the participants knew what needed to be done and their actions seemed effortless (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996, 1997). As the participants performed their activities, their team members and their clients provided immediate feedback regarding their actions.

This was present both as a contract worker and a permanent worker. During Larry's contract worker experience, he asserted,

So I think that that was kind of the whole emotional rollercoaster, because I never lost focus of what the goal was, and I just felt like, you know what, the true people that really make it in this business are the people that can turn around and rise above, you know, like a Phoenix, when situations get tough.

Larry was describing his feelings after receiving feedback from his team members. During this discussion, Larry knew what he had to do and he perceived he was capable of accomplishing the tasks. However, during his moments of self-doubt he kept the goals of the activities in perspective and regained his focus.

The clarity of goals were more present in contract work due to the nature of contract work, which required the contract worker to be assigned specifically to activities that matched a targeted skill sets or knowledge area. Francis expressed,

Where I think consulting—and that’s another benefit of consulting is that somebody hired you and they hired you for something. And usually—I can’t say always, but usually, they know why. [Laughs] And with that, you have—it’s a definitive thing, and it’s usually time-bound and there’s all kinds of nice parameters around it, or can be, or not. But that’s how it starts. ... So my assumption is that they’ve actually thought out what that project is, that they have a timeline associated with it, that there is more—as far as deliverable goes and timing goes, it’s more set.

The conditions, clarity in goals and feedback, are described in more detail later in this chapter under expert-community support.

### *Sense of Control*

During their experiences of flow, the participants’ felt in control. They were confident in their abilities and their actions in relation to the activities. Lucy had a unique situation as a permanent worker where she had control during her experience of flow; however there was moment when she felt she was given too much control, which led to anxiety about the activities and doubts about her environment.

As the Chief Marketing Officer, Lucy perceived she had autonomy, control, and the freedom to be creative during her experience of flow. However, she experienced a state where she had too much control and did not have an experience of flow. Lucy recalled,

I had the control but it was just too much. One of the things that I had really pushed on before I accepted the job was, “We want somebody outside of healthcare like ... because we want to be marketing driven.” ... Yeah—there was just—I don’t think that they were ready for marketing. I don’t think they really understood what marketing meant even though I pressed on that before I started the job. I think it was just, it just was after a while, I don’t know. I would have loved to have stayed in that role and I think in today’s world if I had that position it would probably have been something that I would love just again, being lead,

providing that vision and that leadership role in the areas of marketing and product development, but I think back then it was just—they didn't really get it. I would put together reports and some of the executive team would like—they thought I was speaking Greek because they didn't understand advertising and some of the gross rating points and all that kind of stuff you use to analyze advertising.

This finding is an example of being presented with challenges above the individual's skill sets. In this situation, Lucy did not feel in control of her environment and this had an impact on her well-being as a permanent worker.

### *Sense of Time*

In flow, participants are not aware of time; they do not focus on the passage of time itself. They were so involved in their activities that they lost sense of how much time has actually passed. The “sense of how much time has passes depends on what they are doing” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 113). Troy, Ken, and Lucy did discuss the longer hours they worked when they had experiences of flow when compared to their nonflow experiences.

Earlier, Troy discussed working more than 40-hour work weeks while he had experiences of flow as a contract worker. When not in flow, he worked 40 hours a week.

Ken also described the long hours working on his flow activity as a permanent worker. He stated,

But there are times when you're spending, I mean, I think there was probably about four or five weekends in a row that we were all just working nonstop seven days a week just to get this stuff going.

Ken's sense of time during his experience of flow as a permanent worker was not tracked by the time on a clock, but by the progress being made on the flow activity. Lucy stated about her experience of flow as a permanent worker,

But I have to say I mean it was just crazy. I'd find myself in the office at midnight, 1:00 in the morning because I was in meetings until 6:00 or more barely

with even have time for lunch. My secretary would run out. ... My secretary was like mom. She just took care of me. She'd stand in front of my door when I needed to get out of there to catch my plane because she was taking me and she'd stand, point at her watch and let me know I needed to wrap it up. ... I never had lunch that was just a social thing.

When compared to her experiences of nonflow as a permanent worker, Lucy worked fewer hours each week. As stated earlier, as Lucy's career progressed, she wanted work-life balance. This may have contributed to her less frequent experiences of flow as a permanent worker. Hence, she became aware of her time at work as a permanent worker.

#### *Autotelic Experience*

Flow is an autotelic experience that does not need a goal or an external reward (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1996, 1997). The enjoyment and motivation comes from doing the activity itself. Francis and Lucy demonstrated this autotelic personality: As a contract worker, Francis acknowledged,

And they paid me [Laughter] you know what I mean? You don't get many of those gigs where you like what you're doing and they're paying you. ... I was hired to do exactly what I wanted to.

As a permanent worker Francis stated,

I got to do the whole thing and watch it all the way through. So that, to me was more satisfying in that respect.

Francis found enjoyment in accessing her skills, regardless of whether she was a contract worker or a permanent worker.

As a contract worker, Lucy said,

I want to help people. I want to help companies.

Lucy was at a point in her life when she wanted to find a work-life balance and still do what she loved to do. Lucy was not expecting a senior-level role in a corporation or a

high paying salary. Lucy was content with being a marketing professional and creating new products for others.

The findings demonstrated the presence of the nine conditions to achieve flow. The next sections will examine the work conditions that emerged from this study, which had an impact on the flow conditions and the experience of flow. The remaining sections will explore the work conditions that emerged from this study and the impact they had on the flow conditions.

### *Organization Complexity*

In this study, organization complexity is defined as the intricate interactions between individuals and or groups that occur within the organization and external to the organization. This work condition is not an exploration of complexity theory or the theory of complex adaptive organizations (Bloch, 2005; Stackman, Henderson, & Bloch, 2006). Organization complexity is explored in relation to the interactions in the organization as they relate to flow. When this work condition was present it did not provide a positive experience for Martha and Ken as contract workers and for Lucy as a permanent worker. However, Martha and Ken found a way to manage this work condition and prevent it from continuing to distract them from their activities. Lucy was not able to manage this distraction and it deterred her from continuing her activity as a permanent worker.

At the time of this study, both Martha and Ken were contract workers for the same client undergoing a merger, which created additional complexities for their work setting. They discussed how working on an activity in the complex environment had an impact on their experiences as contract workers. In addition to relearning their old skills

and not being in senior-management roles, their organization complexities included working in two organizations with different processes, nomenclatures, and assignments that both organizations were trying to consolidate. Martha was the only participant who specifically used the term organization complexity and Ken identified complex elements in the organization that contributed to him feeling some discomfort during his activity.

In the early stages of Martha's assignment, her attention was more focused on the complexity of the two organizations involved in her activity than on her skills and the challenges presented by the activity. Martha stated,

We had to function, but I've frankly considered the difference between the organizations, the differences in roles and responsibilities, the differences in processes, artifacts, I consider that to be frankly a nuisance. And would have preferred not to have to have to deal with it. ... I wouldn't use the word exciting to describe how I felt about that phase of organizing the program. It seemed to me it was some sort of a necessary step. It was just part of what you needed to do. ... I wasn't excited about [activities] until we actually got to work. It was at—the entire assignment itself was exciting and challenging, but the differences between the organizations was kind of a nuisance that had to be dealt with.

I wondered what kept her going if the contract work was not so exciting and she responded,

Well, the whole assignment was really exciting. When Joe first talked to me about the opportunity, it was like wow, that really leverages everything that I've done in credit card. It leverages the relationships I have with people in the credit card business, including the head of the business. I would be working directly with my former boss, and the people that I managed. The whole assignment was very exciting to me and it's level of importance to the company. It was also really motivating and compelling.

The organization complexities were initially a distraction for Martha. However, she was able to limit her distractions when she believed there was a balance between her perceived skills and perceived challenges. Martha also recognized the opportunity of flow existed and was able to keep herself engaged enough to get through the distractions and then have an experience of flow.



Ken's organization complexity during a merger included (a) being part of a newly created team that did not have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, (b) being without a leader for a brief period of time, and (c) being in an organization where the processes were new to him. This occurred while he was expected to meet a deadline that could not be changed. He recalled,

As I had mentioned, where we had very little time to get this stuff done, and then knowing—relying on a large number of group—that I didn't have a lot of history with, and also knowing from a process perspective, still trying to figure out how a lot of things worked around here. ... Well, when I first joined the team that I became a part of—it was basically Sally's team was just formed in June or July prior to when I joined in September. So they were just—her team—or this time that I was a part of had just started to figure out who they were and what this team was about and how they were going to get off the ground. And then the manager who I worked with the most directly, she was located in Phoenix. About a month after I joined, she, she quit, right.

He continued to state,

So then we were scrambling to find somebody else to come in and take her place. About a month later, somebody did, in late October or so. And then so while all that was going on, I'm still trying to figure out—I didn't have—I had very little sort of guidance the first two months, I was like, "Wow. How is this going work?" That was more of a very uncomfortable kind of if you're plucked out of one place and thrown into another and you're trying to figure out—get your bearings—and understand who's on first and what you have to do...

Like Martha, before Ken had an experience of flow, his initial experience as a contract worker was not very satisfying due to the organization complexity. Ken found,

All [complexities] at the same time. And that was very uncomfortable. ... I think it would—I mean, quite honestly, because of the details—or I should say the requirements and all that, what—I think looking back now, it was frustrating. It was uncomfortable. It was kind of nerve-wracking, to be honest, at first...

Nevertheless, Ken obtained motivation from within and discovered what he identified earlier as his "survivor skills." For Ken, this work condition could perhaps be a "spurious motivational element" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 42), a concept that was discussed earlier under the flow-conditions section. The work condition, organization complexity,

encouraged Ken to participate in the activity, which perhaps contributed to Ken looking within himself and finding his “survivor skills.” Ken described,

But then it [organization complexity in the activity] also gave me a chance to really figure it from a skill perspective; kind of you rely on those skills more than rely on somebody else telling you what to do. So this is where you really have to kind of lead a team or lead, in this particular case, a program. So you just—it’s almost like survivor skills, a little bit in a sense.

Ken’s motivation was also fed by the energy he received from his expert community. The impact the expert community had on Ken’s experience will be discussed later in this section. He stated,

’Cause, also, the merger was going on at the same time. So I think this whole, all the energy around here, too, is just so focused on regulatory, on merger, on all this stuff, so people were already kind of in that sort of mindset in a sense that this stuff had to just get done. So it was sort of like that no can-do attitude. It was a must-do attitude.

As mentioned earlier, Lucy had permanent worker experiences of flow as the Chief Marketing Officer in the healthcare industry, but she experienced a state where she experienced anxiety. Lucy brought her skills to an industry that was new to her and she encountered complexities in her organization such as government rules and regulations, healthcare industry guidelines, and a different segment of customers she never worked with before. She explained,

It’s very, very regulated. So I wasn’t used to that. It was very complicated set ups because you’ve got the insurance and the insurance decisions are made by the consumer but you’re actually selling it to the employers and then you’ve got the pharma, big pharma people that are dictating this and you’ve got the government dictating that. Then you’ve got the providers, the hospitals and the doctors and rrr. It was just oh my god.

Lucy also had the added complexity of not having an expert community which, like Ken, will be discussed later in the expert-community-support section. All of these complexities contributed to Lucy’s eventual departure as the Chief Marketing Officer and

returning to contract work. Unlike Martha and Ken, Lucy was unable to limit the distractions caused by the work condition organization complexity and she was unable to focus on her skills as a marketing professional.

Organization complexity provided moments of frustration and unsettled feelings for Martha, Ken, and Lucy. This work condition was a distraction that received attention from Martha and Ken, but they were able to limit this distraction and provide focus to their perceived skills and perceived challenges in their activities as contract workers. Lucy was unable to limit this distraction as a permanent worker and she was unable to continue having experiences of flow. Like organization complexity, organization politics was also perceived as a distraction, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### *Organization Politics*

Organization politics was one condition that did not provide a positive experience. However, if managed improperly, it could have a negative impact on the experience of flow. The concept of organization politics was discussed during Larry's and Troy's contract-worker experiences of flow. However, the outcomes were different for Larry and Troy.

Larry described organization politics as being conscious of others' feelings and respecting their points of view or else being reprimanded. Larry related,

But then you become full-time and then you have to play, all of a sudden they're no longer step-children; they are your family. Right? And you have to treat them—and like with any family, you know, you've got your sisters and your brothers that you have more in common with, then you've got those that they can pull mama by the skirt and go tell when you're out past 11:00 or whatever. And sometimes you have to be a little cognizant of the corporate politics when you're a full-time employee.

Larry believed when he became a permanent worker he had to become part of a political community, which required him to limit his freedom to speak honestly about his work and others. Larry clarified,

And so, thus, I think that takes a level of sometimes glean off of some of the projects that I've worked on, because, you know, you go into a project knowing I've got five good people and then two that are going to be like thorns in my side. And whether you—you know—I go to enough of these classes where they say, "No matter what, go into these initial projects with, you know, keeping an open mind." Well it's been hard for me to keep an open mind I guess in a lot of these full-time positions when I've just gotten off of a project with that same thorn and I'm going to a new project with this thorn, and all of a sudden you're supposed to just, you know, take your mind and divest it of all of this stuff that this individual has been trying to do for you to the last two months and then go back and say, "Hey, welcome back on this project. I'm glad to see you."

Larry saw organization politics as an inhibitor of his experiences of flow as a permanent worker. Contract work allowed him the ability to freely speak his mind without worrying about the organization politics. Larry believed this honesty allowed the project and him to progress into a positive direction. If he was not allowed to be honest, then there was an impact on his performance. Larry explained,

But I think that when you're a contractor and you're trying to prove yourself and you're doing all this stuff, you know, you sometimes have a higher tolerance for any company's corporate politics. ... You know, because I wasn't sure as a contractor I was going to be there after that project, so I had no problem saying, "This is who I'm having a problem with."

Commitment to an organization meant Larry had to be conscious of his actions and the actions of his peers. Larry believed this awareness of corporate politics held him back from being true to himself and limited his work productivity.

In contrast, Troy coped with organization politics as a contract worker and was able to have experiences of flow. As a contract worker, Troy worked under two different working arrangements. In the first scenario, Troy contracted with a software company that already sold its business products to the client. Afterwards, the software company

signed a contract with the client to build something new. Troy was then introduced to the client by the software company and was therefore respected, realized as a leader, and as an expert in information technology and project management. He did not have to prove himself or his skills; he was perceived as credible. Troy stated,

You're the recognized expert for the tool, and so people are generally going to listen to what you have to say, as long as it's reasonable and, you know, makes sense. ... if you're there under the contract of the vendor, you know, your credibility is more established, because the vendor has a huge contractual burden to get the client live and get the client references for future sales and whatnot.

In this scenario, he did not interact with the senior business leaders; he interacted with those doing the actual work on the project. He felt comfortable in this scenario.

In the second scenario, Troy worked as an independent contractor through different agencies. In this situation, the agencies presented Troy with contract work they believed aligned with his skills sets. If Troy accepted the contract work, then he worked directly with the agencies' clients. Troy was presented with the challenge of organization politics by working directly with the senior business leaders. In this scenario, there was not a software sales team building a rapport with senior management. Because Troy worked directly with clients, he had to establish his trustworthiness and get the senior business leaders' approval. He stated,

So I need to establish my credibility directly and individually with various stakeholders based on my interactions with them.

In this setting he had more interactions with senior management and perceived he had to become more aware of the organization politics. Troy continued to explain,

Yeah, so I would say the absence of having to like navigate political landmines so you can focus on the job at hand, versus like, you know, smoothing everyone's feathers. You know, usually politics really just means meeting with a bunch of people one-on-one, making sure they feel like they've been understood and heard and their view has been accounted for, which is great; I'm all for that. But that takes up a lot of time. ... I don't really like being political at all; I don't enjoy

that. I would much rather like write some code than go like try to like be a political.

This was something he did not like to do, but during the interview he laughed when I questioned if this inhibited or added to the excitement because he seemed to brighten up while discussing this new challenge. He later admitted that learning how to deal with organization politics was a skill he acquired and has gotten better at over the years, but he would not want a job where all he did was “rub elbows.” He said,

But I guess over the years I’ve gotten better at it. It’s just like one of those skills I think that everyone sort of acquires along life’s path, but it’s not—you know—I would never want a job where all I do is like rub elbows with people and, you know.

When required, Troy worked with organization politics in order to focus on his work.

Similar to organization complexity, this work condition could perhaps be a “spurious motivational element” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 42). Organization politics was a distraction that perhaps encouraged Troy to participate in the activity and hence he limited this distraction, became intrinsically motivated, and was focused on his perceived skills and perceived challenges in his second scenario as a contract worker. However, organization politics deterred Larry from perhaps potential flow opportunities as a permanent worker.

In the next section, I explore bonding with the organization and developing social networks. This work condition when combined with organization politics had an impact on the participants’ experiences of flow.

#### *Bonding With the Organization and Developing Social Networks*

Developing bonds with individuals and with the organization was discussed only as permanent workers. As permanent workers, bonding with the organization and the team members contributed to experiences of flow for Ken and Francis. For Troy and

Larry, this bonding experience was coupled with organization politics and it was also an inhibitor to their experiences of flow as a contract worker and a permanent worker. Troy perceived it was easier to bond with individuals as a permanent worker. However, it was possible for Troy to establish bonds with individuals as a contract worker. When it became difficult to do so as a contract worker, he had a negative contract-worker experience. Conversely, Larry perceived bonding with individuals and the organization as a permanent worker limited his voice.

Troy was able to establish social relationships during his contract working experiences; however, they were not as deep or as meaningful when compared to Ken's and Francis's permanent working relationships. The nature of Troy's contract working experiences required him to work closely with clients. This resulted in developing bonds, but at the same time Troy maintained a professional rapport with their clients. Troy stated,

Like I definitely try to keep a boundary with clients. ... More so than with coworkers. ... You kind of keep a little bit of a professional distance. Although I always had really good relations with almost all my clients. ... I generally had really good work relationships with all my clients. Some of them have even become friends, where we would like go out and have dinner or drinks or whatever after work. Especially during a deployment, because everyone works really hard and people tend to get close, especially as a small project team. And at that point the line between client and vendor kind of gets blurred if everyone is working together really hard. So I've definitely had clients like that, where we keep in touch and I would use them as personal references and we got drunk together or whatever. But you know, typically even if it hasn't been that close, I've had like good relationships with my clients. There have been like a couple in my lifetime that we just did not mesh well at all.

Contract-work experiences where Troy did not have a good working relationship resulted in him being replaced by another contract worker. He averred,

Well, on those projects I didn't—I mean—ultimately I swapped out with someone else, because we just didn't have the rapport.

Troy also discussed the limitation of forming relationships as a contract worker. Because he maintained a professional space between himself and his clients, Troy perceived contract work limited his ability to voice his opinion about certain client issues. He explained,

Within CA [Troy's permanent employer], like after we worked together for a while and became sort of friends, you know, there might be an element of gossiping about coworkers or complaining about some sort of management policy or the timesheet system or the expense report reimbursement policy. But whatever that kind of like, where you can kind of complain or just speak your mind, but you don't really do that with clients.

After further discussion, this limitation was linked to the organization politics Troy discussed earlier. Because Troy could not speak freely as he did when he was a permanent worker, he had to "rub elbows" to establish his credibility with his clients.

Once Larry became a permanent worker, he viewed the political community as an inhibitor to potential experiences of flow. This was also discussed earlier in the organization-politics section. Larry likened the political community to being part of a family. With any family, relationships, whether good or bad, are established and there are tacit rules one must follow.

Previously, Larry stated,

But then you become full-time and then you have to play, all of a sudden they're no longer step-children; they are your family. Right? And you have to treat them—and like with any family—you know, you've got your sisters and your brothers that you have more in common with, then you've got those that they can pull mama by the skirt and go tell when you're out past 11:00 or whatever.

The family Larry became part of required him to follow norms and form bonds, which he perceived to limit his performance as a permanent worker. As a contractor, Larry was not motivated to respect those family tenets, which he perceived to be freeing, and allowed him to be both honest about his work and how he felt about others.



Ken discussed his permanent-worker activity in terms of having a long-term relationship with his organization and likened it to possessing and caring for an object. As the owner of the object, he was obligated to take care of it and was more invested in the outcome and all other aspects of the activity when compared to being a contract worker. If something went wrong during his permanent worker activity, then there was a more emotional and personal connection between Ken and the organization. Ken stated,

I felt that I was owning, if you will, a piece of the process, or the organization or the company. ... Yeah, renting versus owning type of thing. If something happens to your house when you're renting, you're like you almost feel the pain. If you're owning—if you're renting—I'm sorry. If something happens to your house or your car that you own it, you're like, "Ow." You feel it. Whereas, if you're renting like, "Hmm, not my problem."

Ken was in a long-term relationship with his organization and there was deeper sense of pride in his permanent worker activity.

Francis experienced having a social network as a permanent worker and the difficulties of establishing one as a contract worker. Partnerships were important to Francis and as a permanent worker she had to manage a large team. Therefore, she created social communities that fostered the creation of partnerships and an environment where people could enjoy their work. She stated,

It was all fun. [Laughs] We had a lot of fun. ... I had people dropping into my staff meetings from other departments for a while. ... I kept it [staff meetings] open because we had so many partners, and we were—it wasn't—the effort itself couldn't be done just by this group. It had to involve a lot of different either departments or people or whatever you want to call it. So sure, if you want to come and play or listen or find out, come on down.

Francis allowed team members to get to know each other on a personal level, which allowed them to share common bonds. Francis believed the relationships and the work environment she created also made the team more productive which led to her enjoyment as a permanent worker. She expressed,

We just had a lot of fun. So we did a lot of work. It was a lot of work, but it was you spent the first part of it [staff meetings] just talking about how shitting everybody is, [laughs] or how good everything is, or what's happening—not happening—and it was more you. I incorporated more of a social aspect to the work.”

It is also important to note that Francis was in control and had the autonomy to create such an environment.

When compared to a permanent worker, the contract worker was with the organization for a defined period of time and not included as part of the larger whole. Therefore, it became difficult to form bonds if the contract worker's time was limited. Francis stated,

You're more bits and pieces of a whole process.

Francis believed it was easier to form a community as a permanent worker when the team members were physically present and available. She said,

You can form community within a work environment, a full-time gig, because you're there every day, kind of thing.

Francis experienced the lack of physical presence and the inability to form a social community as a contract worker in a virtual environment. Her interactions with her team members were limited to phone calls and e-mails. She cited,

It was completely virtual, which I don't think I've ever done that where the entire program or whatever was created virtually, and there was no face time with any of the participants.”

Never physically meeting or seeing a team member was a new challenge for Francis during her contract-worker experience and this did not contribute to her experience of flow as a contract worker.

Despite the temporary nature of contract work, it was possible to form bonds with individuals and establish social and emotional connections with team members. However,

when compared to permanent work, the study did not reveal the formation of bonds with an organization as a contract worker. As permanent workers, the participants felt a sense of devotion and a deeper commitment to their activities because they were part of something bigger than themselves. This seemed to be lacking for the participants as contract workers. This deeper connection to the whole contributed to their positive experience as permanent workers. The next emergent work condition to be explored is expert community support, which when present also contributed to the participants' positive experience.

#### *Expert Community Support*

Having the support from a community of experts in the same field had an impact on the experience of flow. The participants felt validated when the experts in the field provided their support in the form of feedback and removed obstacles that threatened the completion of the activity. The participants perceived they had the skill sets to meet the challenges, and the support from the community of experts confirmed the participants' application of their knowledge to their activities; their activities had more significance. This work condition had an impact on Lucy's experiences of flow as a contract worker and a permanent worker. Both Francis and Martha experienced community support as permanent workers and Ken experienced it as a contract worker. Regardless of the worker role, when the expert-community support was present, the worker had a positive experience.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) examined this expert community with regard to creativity and flow. Csikszentmihalyi believed creativity was better described with a model composed of three interrelated parts: the domain, the field, and the person. The

domain consisted “of a set of symbolic rules and procedures” (p. 27). The field included “all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain” (p. 28). Finally, the person had knowledge of the domain and used its symbols to create something new. This creation was then evaluated by the field for inclusion into the domain. Like the field, the expert community’s impact on the experience of flow was determined by how well it (a) championed support for the new idea or the activity, (b) supported the worker, and (c) represented the domain or the area of expertise.

In both Lucy’s contract and permanent-worker experiences, she perceived she had the skills to do the job. However, as a permanent worker her expert community lacked marketing representation, which eventually had an impact on her experiences of flow. As a permanent worker, she was hired to apply her marketing expertise to a new industry. However, she was the only expert in the organization and she did not have a strong or supportive executive team to meet the organization’s marketing goals. She stated,

I just didn’t have a *strong bench*. I think again it was because they were in this whole—their whole lives nobody ever worked outside of healthcare—So they just didn’t get it. It’s like that’s what they were used to.

This lack of bench strength or expert-community support, which also represented an untenable domain in marketing, contributed to her leaving her executive role and returning to contract work.

As a contract worker, Lucy’s environment contained marketing experts who understood marketing and understood what she had to offer. This expert community believed in Lucy and removed obstacles in the way of her activities. She stated,

...just knocked it down and there were no walls, there were no barriers. There was—I mean like I said it was like talk about your dream situation—where you come in and do these things.

This allowed Lucy to continue her approach and apply her knowledge and expertise to the needs of the activity. This support allowed her to obtain support from other team members and they developed an appreciation for what Lucy was trying to achieve. Lucy enthused,

I think soon enough they started to realize, “Hey, this is actually a good thing. You’re expanding the relationship when you have more relationships and more touch points.” ... I felt so motivated. I felt again, like there were no barriers. There wasn’t this box and because there was this clean slate. ... that’s what was behind the motivation.

Lucy’s expert-community support as a contract worker made her feel powerful and in control of her activities. She established her credibility and conquered her activities with confidence. She stated,

I felt like—I don’t know, like the Queen of Sheba or something—I don’t know. It was just, it was fabulous.

Her management community was interested in learning and the community allowed Lucy to create what was needed in order to learn.

Both Francis and Martha had support from their expert community as permanent workers. Although they did not discuss the impact on their experience when it was not present as contract workers, they did discuss how they felt when it was present as permanent workers. Francis stated,

...the buy-in was really good, and I had the support of all the upper management, at least my upper management, and client, or whatever you want to call it. So it was a success. In a corporate setting, that was success.

Martha indicated,

In one of the senior management offsite, KR’s offsite, I was responsible for a big part of their agenda, which included using our creative services to do a multimedia presentation and presented the whole benefit framework and product. And in the course of—as I was wrapping up the presentation—KR goes, “Yay Martha.” This is in a group of like 200 team managers and card and everybody started clapping. That was very satisfying. ... That was very validating.

Having that support gave them the feeling of accomplishment and contributed to their positive experiences as permanent workers.

Ken was new to the contract working environment and the expert-community support provided Ken with the confidence and validation he needed to know he was moving in the correct direction. Ken's community also shared his concerns and he did not feel he was alone in his efforts. He related,

Honestly, I felt like that—I mean—even if I had my own internal sort of fears or concerns or whatever, like the feedback I would get from ... everybody had sort of that same sense, and it's like you're not alone. Even though we always internalize those things and whatnot, I felt that as long as I have the support and everybody knows kind of everybody is on the same playing field and we're all dealing with the same variables and stuff— then I'm not—I don't feel like a fool or an idiot.

Although Lucy was the only participant who compared the presence of the expert community and the lack of one, the participants' described positive experiences when it was present. The presence of the expert community gave the participants motivation to keep working on their activity, it validated their work, and it gave them a sense of accomplishment. Next, the last emergent work condition to be discussed is the perception of contract work.

#### *Perception of Contract Work*

The participants' perception of what it meant to be a contract worker shaped the way they approached contract work and how they experienced it. This theme was significant only for Ken and Martha.

Ken was the only participant who used contracting as a temporary job until he could find permanent work. He reflected,

So it was kind of like a side thing. It wasn't as if I was trying to do it specifically looking for contract work. I was doing that kind of in parallel, just to do FTE work, just to see until I can find a more full-time position type of thing.

As in the previous section, as a permanent worker Ken bonded with his organization because he felt more accountable and invested in his activities. In his earlier analogy in which he compared home ownership to renting, he stated,

Yeah, renting versus owning type of thing. If something happens to your house when you're renting, you're like you almost feel the pain. If you're owning—if you're renting—I'm sorry. If something happens to your house or your car that you own it, you're like, "Ow." You feel it. Whereas, if you're renting like, "Hmm, not my problem."

In this statement, Ken viewed contract work as renting and not owning. Ken did have experiences of flow as a contract worker; however, the experiences were not as deep or as rich because the bond between him and the organization was lacking. He still applied his skills and knowledge as needed toward the activity. However, because his time as a contract worker was short-term when compared to being a permanent worker, he did not invest himself in the activity. He clarified,

Whereas, as a contractor, I'm brought in to help out. And then knowing that my time is going to be—is X, whether it be 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, or whatever—then I'll go and do something else. But I'm here to do a specific job or project.

Martha took a more serious approach to contract work and had an issue with the term contract worker. She preferred the term "independent marketing professional" because it better represented who she was and what she had to offer. She explained,

Well, I think a contractor, the word contractor talks about the way you've engaged with a company. Doesn't talk about what value you deliver in the role and I know it's a convenient way to distinguish between employee and a contractor, but it's more of a technical term. It has nothing—it doesn't describe who you are. I left marketing in very senior levels of management to work as a consultant and some of the agencies that I've registered with, one agency uses independent marketing professionals as the way they described their talent force.

Martha was well respected in the financial-services industry and this term maintained her credibility as a contract worker and how she approached her work.

Consequently, from Martha's perspective, the term contract worker seemed very limited in scope and did not represent her as a marketing professional. Martha perceived her activities as a contract worker were given the same attention as if she was a permanent worker, and she took pride in her work.

Ken and Martha had opposite views about contract work and it directed how they approached their contract work. They both had perceived experiences of flow as contract workers, but Martha invested more of who she was into the activity whereas Ken did not engage as much as he would have if he was a permanent worker.

The findings demonstrated the flow conditions and explored the work conditions that emerged from this study. The next section will examine the extent being a skilled professional contract worker had an impact on the quality of the flow experience as compared to being a permanent worker.

### Research Question 3: Worker Quality Impact on Flow

Flow is a psychological state in which the person feels cognitively resourceful, motivated, and happy at the same time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Troy's, Martha's, and Ken's experiences of flow had that quality when they were able to create. Personal and professional growth was the quality both Larry and Martha tried to achieve in their contract worker experiences. Lucy's and Francis's quality experience was determined by being able to do work in the field they've enjoyed and respected throughout their careers and they wanted to give back to their work community.

Troy's experiences of flow as a contract worker had that quality when he was able to create and his credibility was already established. As mentioned earlier, Troy was a



contract worker in two different scenarios. In the first scenario he represented a software company called CA. As a contractor with CA his credibility was already established. In this scenario he had more opportunities to create. He stated,

They [CA's client] signed a contract with CA to provide a consultant and this and that, and CA signed a contract with me, and then they provided me to the client. And so I represent CA and I'm like the expert on site. And that's a good feeling to—like people look up to you, they respect you, they kind of—they listen when you have some advice to tell them. And I enjoy that. ... So yeah, you get to be really creative and you have a feeling of accomplishment when it's all done, I think ... When you flip the switch, you go live, you convert the data, you have a feeling of accomplishment.

Troy's opportunities to create occurred when the client needed something new.

During those moments his concentration was very high and he was enjoying his work.

When his contract work consisted of routine work, he did not have the same enjoyment or the same sense of accomplishment. He stated,

But when you're being creative I think you have an added, at least I have an added, you know, it's even more fulfilling because you really get to stop and sit back and think, "Wow, how can I solve this problem? How can I do this?" ... And so definitely when I'm running a project like that it's very, very, very focused, because, you know, like everyone's looking to me to do the whole thing, they don't have—like I'm the leader—But I would definitely say that it's definitely more fun to implement a software for the first time, versus doing what I would call sustaining engineering.

Ken and Martha's experiences of flow as permanent workers also had a better quality when they created something new, which resulted in their creations being recognized and validated by others in their industry. Martha took pride in taking something abstract and unknown and designing something more concrete. She acknowledged,

To me, that's very exciting and that's why product development is as a role, as a function is the thing that most motivates me in a professional context. It's taking that puzzling through that abstract notion of what can we offer and it's also partly my deep sense of—my competitive spirit—I like to beat the competition.

As part of her permanent worker experience, her design was patented, which made her feel validated. She affirmed,

I like to do something that doesn't exist and it was the first of its kind and we succeeded in getting it patented ... so that was extremely validating and then ultimately launching it and finding that it was as profitable, but in different ways than we had expected.

Martha had more opportunities as a permanent worker to create something new when compared to her contract-worker opportunities, and the ability to create was very inspiring for Martha. As she reflected on her experiences as a permanent worker, she became very humble and appreciated the experiences and knowledge she acquired as a permanent worker. She stated,

So the opportunity to create, and this was true across the work that I did in product development ... probably the most compelling and motivating of my experiences as a full-time employee. ... I would say this is true of all of the product development initiatives I've had and the reason for that is with those product development initiatives, they were dealing with abstract—they were dealing with coming up with a concept, with creating an idea—of taking an idea and turning it into something that's very concrete. ... The kind of work that I was engaged in was a lot more exciting and in hindsight I would have, knowing what I know now, would not have looked elsewhere, at least in the financial sector.

Ken also had the opportunity to create something as a permanent worker. He launched a new product that took a large team effort and the idea of community and relationship was important for Ken during this experience. As the activity progressed and it came closer to its end Ken became more excited and focused. He explained,

We launched their first actual eCommerce sites where you could actually buy the product directly from, in this case, the manufacturer. ... So we launched those—And then we did I thought—we did it within six months, which was a huge effort.

He continued to state,

It was fantastic. It's like you're on a team—you're like—I'll use a sports analogy, again. You're on a team and you just haven't been winning. And then all of a sudden, you win a couple game and then you're like the next thing you know you're in the playoffs type of thing, right? ... It's like there's kind of like an

adrenaline rush and you get more excited about what you're doing. And then, also, your business—when your business partners are the people that you're going to be delivering this product for—they're excited. So, yeah, it's like a nice shot of opportunity and adrenaline and all that. But it's also sort of the; it almost reinvigorates the relationship with your business partners or with your own teams, right?

Ken took pleasure in this experience and put more of himself into his work because he bonded with his organization as a permanent worker. He said,

I enjoyed it 'cause it was something that I felt was making a difference for the company, 'cause I was a part of the company. I was representing the company.

Ken and his team also received recognition for what they created. He enthused,

...we got our team, the teams both on the IT side and on the business side, we won sort of the President's Award that year.

Being recognized and receiving awards and patents was not the original intent for Ken and Martha. Their desire to create provided the quality for their experiences. Having their work validated by their work community was an additional outcome from their experiences of flow as permanent workers.

Personal and professional growth was a quality aspect for both Martha and Larry.

Martha maintained,

It was exciting, it was very exciting because what I find in a professional context when I have something that's really challenging, that really makes me stretch and when it has a lot of learning opportunity, that to me is exciting.

Martha was pursuing higher levels of professional challenges to improve her skills. Larry became more confident in his abilities when he experienced personal and professional growth. He stated,

And again, I think that, you know, those are the things that are most important to me. I want to be in an environment where I'm comfortable. Right? Meaning that not comfortable that I'm just doing a job and it's the same thing; I'm comfortable in an environment where I can actually turn on and take the personal goals that I have and feel that I can take those and try to apply those things and get better and possibly do some other things.

After his experience of flow as a contract worker, his confidence in his skills grew, which was noticed by those in his personal and professional life. Larry stated,

I think it promoted a new confidence. My mother seems to think that after that whole development time that I have this new logic, right? [Laughs] And I think that she believes that I've become, you know, and maybe it's true in a sense, that I've become in a sense maybe less engaged and a little bit more nonchalant, meaning that ... I felt like I was kind of like the, you know, the small guy on the team that's making a big stance, because all of those people are way above my pay grade, right. ... And when it was all said and done it wasn't their plan; it was the plan that I had developed, that I looked at and said, "I took them here." So when I left there you couldn't tell me that I wasn't bad, right? When I got ready to go to an interview you couldn't tell me I couldn't—you know—it was a good thing to be able to tell people, "I led a group of 40-plus applications from this to this" ... I was like, "I know I can do this."

Larry knew he did not like working with organization politics, but the contract-worker experience he discussed during the interview taught him how to work better with others and how to deal with varied opinions. He realized this was a sign of professional growth. He stated,

I felt like it really opened my mind as far as to try to, you know, be one of the kind of people to say, even if you have people that are naysayers, you know, to kind of get into their mind, understand what they're thinking about from their perspective, and hopefully, you know, you take all of those things into consideration when you're trying to have a really well-rounded plan to implement something.

Larry would continue to do contract work to gain more personal and professional growth.

Another element that made the experience of flow a quality experience was being able to work in the field they respected and understood. Francis and Lucy enjoyed what they did and were not concerned about money because they believed money would always be there. Being a contract worker allowed them the flexibility to seek contract work that offered an opportunity.

Lucy wanted to work on doing what she appreciated and she wanted to share that

with others. She related,

I want to help people. I want to help companies. I mean obviously if I'm going to put myself into it I'm going to probably not do it for free but like I said the motivation for me is not the money. The money's always there but it's just really helping companies and doing what I love to do and what I feel I'm good at. ... I think part of it was been there, done that. I don't have anything to prove and I don't want to work 80 hours a week anymore.

Francis enjoyed her field of work and getting paid for what she enjoyed was an added benefit. She stated, "And they paid me. You know what I mean? You don't get many of those gigs where you like what you're doing and they're paying you." Doing what she enjoyed allowed her to commit herself to her work, which lead to better experiences for herself and her team. She stated,

It [The contract work] was also in something I was very interested in doing. ... But it was energizing because I got excited about it. It's been a really long time since I've got excited about work kind of thing, so that was fun, and that made fun. And if it's fun, you do put a lot more effort into it. And I think you do a better job anyway, 'cause your excitement gets conveyed so everybody else gets kind of—you feed off each other, anyway.

The findings demonstrated the quality of the flow experiences were related to having higher frequencies flow. The next section will examine the extent the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work and its impact on flow when compared to the constraints and benefits of permanent work and its impact on flow.

#### Research Question 4: Constraints and Benefits Impact on Flow

All of the participants chose to remain contract workers, though their reasons varied. Their reasons were based on the participants' experiences of flow, the flexibility of contract working, the work–life balance it offered, and the opportunity to pursue contract roles where there is a balance between their knowledge and the qualities of the role. Ken and Martha had better experiences as permanent workers, but they liked the flexibility, the work–life balance contract work offered, and they will continue

contracting. Lucy and Larry had better experiences as contract workers and will continue to pursue those experiences as contract workers. Lucy also chose contract work for its flexibility and work–life balance. Martha, Lucy, and Larry also wanted the flexibility to pursue roles that they perceived to be a fit with their experience and knowledge. Troy had more frequent and better experiences as a contract worker and will keep contracting. Francis liked contract work, but after this study worked as a permanent worker for a consulting firm because her new role had the elements of contract work and she felt like a contract worker.

The theory of flow predicts that experiences will be most positive when there are enough opportunities for challenges to match a person's perceived skills; in other words there will be a positive balance between challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). One perspective that emerged from this study was having a positive experience when there was a balance between the application of the participants' experiences and knowledge in relation to the characteristics and qualities of the activity. This association was also referred to as fit.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) defined skills as the “capacity to cope with the demands imposed by the environment” (p. 50). He also stated “flow experiences occur in activities where one can cope, at least theoretically, with all the demands for action” (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 45); flow was in relation to the activity. Therefore, Csikszentmihalyi's model was predicated on the individual's ability to cope with the demands of the activity. Fit was the participants' perception of the totality of their experiences in relation to their role. Fit took flow into account and examined how well the participants' knowledge was applied to the features and values of the tasks in their

complex environment. The participants' knowledge may be implied in Csikszentmihalyi's definition of skills, however, in the study some of the participants believed it was worth distinguishing fit from skills.

Both Lucy and Martha discussed this concept of fit during their interview sessions and identified more with the concept of fit rather than with the balance between challenges and skills. Francis also considered knowledge as a more meaningful evaluation than the use of skill sets to rate her experiences of flow. All three participants believed they had the skills and were able to meet the perceived challenges presented by their activities. The meaning of their experiences was better evaluated when measured as the balance between how their expertise was applied against the qualities of the assignment.

As a permanent worker, Lucy was the Chief Marketing Officer for a healthcare organization. Lucy had expert knowledge in marketing, but marketing was not a well-practiced function in her organization. I asked her to rate this challenge on a scale from 0 to 10 and she assigned it a 20. It was not until I asked Lucy to rank her contract-worker challenges that she reflected on the challenges in relation to her skills. She paused during the interview and thought about what she stated earlier about her permanent worker challenge. Lucy believed the challenge ranking gave the impression she could not do her job as a permanent worker and in her view that was not the situation. She offered,

Well when I talk about challenge it was like everything that I did I was totally in charge of. I could totally do and I could do it better than anybody—so I don't want to say I wasn't challenged—it was exciting. It was stuff that—I mean—let's talk about in terms of maybe not challenge. ... At Health Net it was like I had these skills but you guys just don't even begin to understand what they are. ... It wasn't a fit.

Lucy believed she had the skills to meet the challenges both as a contract worker and a permanent worker and she had perceived experiences of flow as both a contract worker and a permanent worker. However, as a permanent worker there was not a fit between her marketing knowledge and the complexities presented by the organization. She believed her contract-worker experiences were more of a fit when compared to her permanent-worker experiences. She said,

It [contract work] was an incredible fit and it was, yeah, because it was an incredible opportunity for me to really use everything in my arsenal. Even at Health Net [her permanent-work organization] we're using everything in my arsenal we're still like, "Okay, but we're still speaking two different languages and we're still", so it was that kind of struggle that we had.

This finding suggested that having experiences of flow did not imply happiness at work or job satisfaction. Lucy added,

We did a couple new products that I developed during my time there [Health Net]. So things happened. We had an advertising campaign. From a marketing—the pure marketing stuff—I instilled this discipline in everybody that they were able to manage their businesses or a segment of the business, and try things and do things and—yeah—it was from that respect it was pretty good. It was—I don't know—It wasn't a job that I was willing to move from Northern California to Southern California for. ... If it had been anything like the experience at Wells Fargo [contract-worker client organization] I would have sold my house and moved down in a heartbeat.

As I mentioned earlier, Lucy was at a point in her career where she wanted a work-life balance and contract work allowed Lucy this balance. Lucy would continue contracting because of the flexibility, the work-life balance, and the fit contract work offered.

Martha also discussed the balance between her expertise and the assignment.

Although she had more meaningful experiences of flow as a permanent worker, she also believed during her contract worker experience of flow there was a good balance between



her experience and the qualities required of the activity. She stated,

I felt like it was really good alignment between what the role needed and the skill set and experiences that I bring, so there was great alignment.

I wondered if her contract-worker experience would be different if the same events were experienced as a permanent worker. I posed this question to her and asked for her feedback. She responded,

So if I had stayed on as an employee and had the responsibility that I did, I don't think my reaction would be any different frankly. ... I think what was the driver of my level of satisfaction and feelings about those two had more to do with the nature of the assignment, not the nature of my employment versus contract status.

Whether the experience occurred as a permanent worker or a contract worker, Martha believed her approach to the activity would be the same. She would provide her knowledge and expertise based on the characteristics and qualities of the assignment, regardless of her role as a permanent or contract worker.

Martha wanted to find work that had a less rigid schedule and she found that in contract work. She stated,

I wanted much more flexibility in terms of working schedule than a full-time employee position would afford. ... The things that relate to flexible work schedule are clearly the most motivating for me as an independent and that's really what drove the decision to stop working as an employee, because I could not accomplish the same level of flexibility that I would have wanted.

Francis also explored the concept of her knowledge being applied to her work as she discussed why she felt validated and had a positive contract worker experience. She stated,

I feel good about it, and it's—the skill set, it's not even—I don't know. It's knowledge. It's not skills, necessarily. It's a whole bunch of knowledge that you have 'cause you've done whatever you've done for a long time. So it's like going to your elder, right, in tribe and saying, "What about this?" "Well, hell, been there about 20 times. I can tell you," right? ... It was more about confidence and validation that I actually knew shit, right?

Francis was confident in her skills and knew she could meet the challenges. However, how she applied her knowledge to the activity and being recognized for that had more depth than looking at the relationship between skills and the challenges.

Interestingly, at the time of this study, Francis was preparing to become a permanent worker for a consulting firm. She preferred contract work and working for the consulting firm would still give her the flexibility and the freedom to work in her respected field as if she was a contractor. She stated,

I think part of the reason it's attractive as a full-time gig is just because it has enough of the contracting consulting piece to it. There's a lot of independence that goes along with it. And there's that flexibility factor that I talked about. Again, if it's a deliverable, they don't care when you do it. You can get it and you don't have to be necessarily chained to the desk.

Larry preferred contracting and would only become a permanent worker if he found the right fit and until he finds it, he will continue contracting. I asked for more understanding and he told me something one of his college professors told him. His professor stated,

You know when you're on the right job when they give you your paycheck and you feel like, I should be backing up to take this paycheck, because this job is so much fun to me, I shouldn't even getting paid for it.

That was what Larry was looking for and he would continue to do contract work until he found a job that gave him so much enjoyment that he could not believe he was getting paid for doing something he liked. That was what made the contract-work experience discussed in this study so memorable for him, in a strange way, for that moment he knew what his professor meant.

Ken had better experiences as a permanent worker and had a negative association with contract work. However, his perspective about contract work seemed to change as he discussed his decision to remain a contract worker. He liked the flexibility of contract

work, and it also gave him time off from being a manager and dealing with management responsibilities. He was beginning to enjoy the novelty of contract work. He stated,

I've just done the management thing or the full-time thing for so long. And this [contract work] is still kind of new, and I'm not quite done with it yet. I'm sure just knowing who I am as person, if I were to do this for probably five or six years, I'd probably be like, "Okay. I'm done, and I'm ready to go back to more of a full-time," you know? ... The feedback I feel that I get is very positive [as a contract worker], and so that also reinforces sort of my—the enjoyment—I enjoy coming back to work here. Do I always enjoy the work I do here? No. But I would be a fool to say 100-percent of the work I do, I love. But I enjoy coming to work here and working in this place with the people and the teams and all that.

His experiences of flow as a contract worker contributed to his decision to remain a contract worker.

### Findings Summary

In the next chapter, I present a summary of the findings and a discussion of the findings in relation to Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow and prior research. I also present a series of implications for practice, education and research.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), for skilled professional contract workers who transitioned from permanent work to contract work.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?
2. To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on the flow conditions?
3. To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience compared to being a permanent worker?
4. To what extent do the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work impact flow when compared to the constraints and benefits of permanent work and its impact on flow?

The overall design of this study was a qualitative research interview study (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) conducted with 6 participants. The participants took part in two semi-structured interviews. Once completed, the data was transcribed and coded.

### Summary of Findings

The extent to which the experiences of flow occurred as a contract worker when compared to the experiences of flow as a permanent worker varied among the participants. Larry did not have any experiences of flow as a permanent worker; however,

the other participants had experiences of flow as both contract workers and permanent workers. The frequency of the experiences of flow as a contract worker when compared to that as a permanent worker also varied by participant. Both Troy and Lucy perceived themselves to have more frequent experiences of flow as contract workers. The frequency with which Francis perceived to experience flow was the same as both a contract worker and a permanent worker. Ken and Martha had more years of experience as permanent workers and being a contract worker was a new experience for them. Ken and Martha perceived themselves to have less frequent experiences of flow as contract workers.

All of the flow conditions demonstrated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996, 1997) were confirmed in this study for the participants both as contract workers and permanent workers. In addition, there were several working conditions that emerged from this study that were related to the flow conditions. They were (a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) the perception of contract work. The impact the work conditions had on participants' experiences of flow varied for different reasons, and being a contract worker or a permanent worker was not always a predictor of the impact on the workers' experiences of flow. In some discussions the work condition allowed meaningful experiences of flow regardless of whether the worker was a contract worker or a permanent worker. In other discussions the work conditions' impact on the experience of flow were determined if the worker was a contract worker or a permanent worker.

Three of these work conditions—(a) organization politics, (b) bonding with the organization, and (c) developing social networks—seemed to be interrelated and,

depending if the worker was a contract worker or a permanent worker, these work conditions contributed to or inhibited the participants' experience of flow. Bonding with the organization and developing social networks were demonstrated during experiences of flow as permanent workers. However, only developing social networks was demonstrated during experiences of flow as contract workers, but not to the same extent as a permanent worker. As a contract worker, there was a tacit rule of maintaining a professional boundary between the contractor and the client while working on an activity. This distance limited the amount and the depth of the socialization between the team and the contract worker. Also, the nature of contract work, which limited the length of stay at the client's site or work location, did not allow contract workers to form long-term relationships with members of the organization and therefore contract workers did not feel a deep sense of obligation to their activity when compared with that of a permanent worker. This sense of obligation influenced how meaningful the activity was to the permanent worker, which indirectly guided the permanent workers' level of attention to their work.

Organization politics seemed to be a work condition the worker could either manage or ignore as a contract worker or a permanent worker. The management of this work condition depended on the tolerance level of the individual worker regardless of the work category. If organization politics was embraced, then it could be suggested that bonding with the team and creating social networks were possible. In turn, there was a possible opportunity to have an experience of flow. However, if organization politics was not embraced, then bonding and social networks were not as developed, and the opportunity for an experience of flow using organization politics could be limited.

Troy embraced organization politics. He preferred not to deal with this condition, but if it was present during his contract-work activity, he knew how to manage it so it would not inhibit his experience of flow. As a result, Troy was seen as a credible contract worker, validating his skills and his perceived ability to perform the activity. Larry's permanent-worker and contract-worker experiences demonstrated the opposite. As a permanent worker, Larry perceived being part of the organization required him to work in organization politics, which also meant bonding and forming a social network at work. This seemed to be a burden for Larry and this burden was an inhibitor to his experience of flow. Larry perceived he did not have the ability to perform his tasks as a permanent worker because he had to be mindful of organization politics. Being mindful of organization politics required his attention and limited the amount of attention he gave to his activity. Therefore, Larry preferred contract work because he perceived he did not have to pay attention to organization politics and he could focus his attention on his perceived abilities to perform the activity.

Receiving support from a community of experts was another work condition that had an impact on the experience of flow and this work condition was present as a contract worker and a permanent worker. Expert community support seemed to contribute to the experience of flow and was interrelated with the flow conditions of feedback and clarity of goals. When the expert community was present, experts (a) provided timely feedback on the worker's activities, (b) validated the worker's actions, (c) evaluated team member actions that might inhibit flow, and (d) removed barriers that inhibit the workers' activities. The expert community's actions either refuted or confirmed the goals of the

activities and the worker's actions. The expert community had the advantage of creating the environment for a flow opportunity.

The participants' perception of contract work also had an impact on their experience of flow. In this study, the negative association with contract work emerged from the 2 participants with the longest permanent-worker history and the shortest contract-worker history. Ken viewed contract work as a temporary placeholder. Due to the temporary nature of contract work, his perception of contract work as a placeholder related to his lack of bonding with the organization and limited the social connection with the team. Martha took pride in her work and wanted a work title that was more fitting with who she was. Taking pride in who she was and what she could do shaped her perception of her abilities and the perception she wanted to convey to others through her work as a skilled professional contract worker. Having a positive association with contract work allowed the contract worker to connect with her knowledge and abilities, and her confidence in her work was evident. This might suggest that having a positive relationship with what it meant to be a contract worker could create an opportunity for flow.

Collectively, work conditions—(a) organization politics, (b) bonding with the organization, (c) developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) perception of contract work—could perhaps be categorized under the other work condition: organization complexity. In this study these work conditions represented the interrelated parts of an organization the workers might come across that could have an impact on workers' experience. These parts could either encourage or distract the workers from potential experiences of flow. Other unique complexities were discussed



with Martha, Ken, and Lucy, which proved to cause discomfort and a frustrating experience during their activities. The participants demonstrated that, like organization politics, if this work condition is embraced, then there may be a potential for a flow opportunity.

The quality of experiences of flow were not determined by the work category contract worker or permanent worker, but by where the worker had higher frequencies of flow. Troy, Larry, Lucy, and Francis had higher frequencies of flow and higher qualities of flow as contract workers. However, Ken and Martha had higher frequencies of flow and higher qualities of flow as permanent workers. The common motivation for the quality experience was the ability to create. This was demonstrated by 3 of the participants; 1 as a contract worker and 2 as permanent workers. The second highest motivation was doing what they were passionate about and this was demonstrated by 2 participants as contract workers. The last motivator was personal and professional growth and this was demonstrated as contract workers.

Overall, the participants preferred contract work to permanent work. The experiences of flow as contract workers and its impact on their decision varied among participants. It can be suggested that when the benefits of contract work are present, the experiences of flow can have an impact on the decision to remain a contract worker, but it is not a predictor of becoming a contract worker. It can also be suggested that higher frequencies of experiences of flow as a contract worker can impact one's decision to remain a contract worker.

Lucy, Troy, and Larry had more frequent experiences of flow as contract workers and their positive experiences as contract workers contributed to their decisions to remain

contractors. Ken and Martha had more frequent experiences of flow as permanent workers. However, Ken enjoyed his contract-worker experiences, which influenced his decision to remain a contractor. Martha also had experiences of flow as a contractor, but her decision was influenced more by the benefits of contract work. She perceived that the application of her knowledge to the activity, regardless of whether it was as a contract worker or as a permanent worker, did not have an impact on how she approached her work. Francis was the only participant who wanted to remain a contract worker but accepted a permanent-worker role because it had the benefits of a contract worker. These benefits of contract work allowed Francis the opportunities for flow in her permanent role.

Next, this chapter reviews the findings in relation to the theory of flow. The review will discuss (a) the flow conditions, (b) the flow model, (c) flow at work, (d) the quality of the experience, and (e) flow and work outcomes.

### Theory of Flow and Prior Research

#### *Flow Conditions*

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996, 1997) identified nine conditions that existed when an individual experienced flow. They were (a) perceived balance between challenges and skills, (b) action awareness, (c) concentration on the activity, (d) clarity in goals, (e) immediate feedback on the activity, (f) a sense of control, (g) a loss of awareness of the self, (h) the sense of time was not related to the passage of time on a clock, and (i) the experience was autotelic. Like other studies of flow, this study demonstrated the existence of these conditions when the participants had experiences of flow. This study

also demonstrated that flow conditions could be present for both contract workers and permanent workers.

Each participant did not discuss all of these flow conditions, but the interrelationships between the presented flow conditions were demonstrated in their experiences of flow. During their experiences of flow, they perceived they had the abilities to lead their team. When it was time to act, they became aware of their actions and performed the needed rituals with their team, which also demonstrated control over their environment. Concentration and attention to their actions helped maintain the experience of flow by reducing the external stimuli. Their goals were also clear and if something did not go well, they would be immediately notified and were prepared to take corrective measures. During this moment, they also forgot about their fears of failure; they forgot about their self-doubts and the doubts of others. They were so involved in their activity that the needs of the activity and their team came before their emotions and their personal needs. The flow conditions worked coherently and balanced each other in order to provide the participants with the opportunity for flow.

The presence of these flow conditions in this study confirmed Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1996, 1997) findings of these conditions and how the flow conditions together produce an environment for flow. However, the flow conditions alone were not predictors of the impact flow had on contract work when compared to permanent work. Other conditions that were identified in this study and not identified in prior research were needed to determine the impact flow had on contract work when compared to permanent work. These conditions were (a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c)

bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) the perception of contract work.

In the permanent work environment, bonding with the organization and developing social networks were interrelated and contributed to the individuals' perception of skills. In the contract-work environment, bonding with the organization and developing social networks were limited due to the nature of contract work. These two work conditions' impact on flow as a contract worker was not as entrenched when compared to the impact on permanent workers.

Organization politics and the individuals' perception of contract work had either a negative or a positive impact on the opportunity for flow. Organization politics did not provide a positive experience for Larry and Troy, but Troy demonstrated organization politics could be managed, and in turn allow a potential opportunity for flow. The individuals' perception of contract work determined how much of themselves they would give to the activity. McKeown (2005) and Redpath et al. (2009) demonstrated that not only did workers become skilled professional contract workers for various reasons, but skilled professional contract workers perceived their work as rewarding. Although Ken did not perceive contract work to be rewarding, Martha confirmed this positive perception of contract work and its impact on flow. It could perhaps be implied if a contract worker had a positive perception of contract work, then the contract worker may have had an opportunity to experience of flow.

Immediate feedback was confirmed as a flow condition, but the additional work condition—expert-community support—contributed to the immediate feedback the skilled professional contract workers received during their activities. The expert

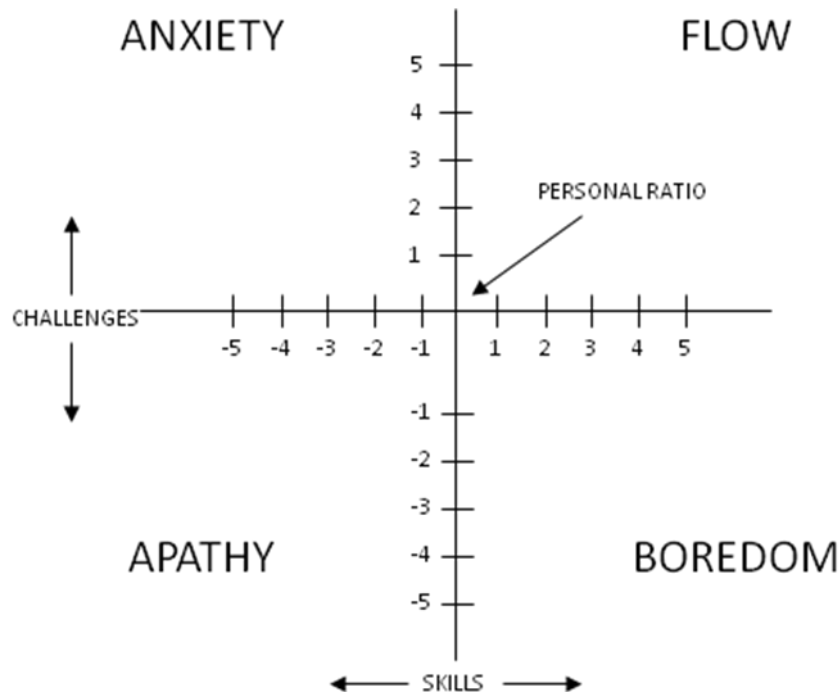
community was instrumental in designing the work environment and allowing opportunities for flow. However, the lack of the expert-community support had an impact on flow for both a contract and a permanent worker.

These additional findings alone are not predictors of the impact flow had on the contract-work environment or the permanent-work environment. A more holistic approach between the existing conditions and the additional conditions was needed before determining the impact flow had on contract work and permanent work. Collectively, these additional work conditions were interrelated and could be quite complex for the worker to manage before having an experience of flow. The additional work conditions could encourage the worker to focus on the activity and thereby limit the external distractions, or they could deter the worker from pursuing a potential opportunity for flow. An example of this dichotomy was the impact organization politics had on Larry's permanent-worker experience when compared to Troy's contract-worker experience. For Larry, organization politics distracted him and deterred him from pursuing potential opportunities of flow as a permanent worker. In contrast, Troy managed this work condition and was able to focus his perceived skills on the activity.

The additional work conditions identified in this study were themselves part of an organization's complexity and one representation of an organization's environment. This study identified four of these intricate parts of an organization, their interrelationships, and their impact on the experience of flow. There may be additional interrelated parts of the organization that impact on the experience of flow, which will be discussed under the future-research section.

### *Flow Model*

The experience of flow is a function of the individual's perceived skills in relation to the individual's perceived challenges (Cejka & Navarro, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi created a flow model (Figure 2) to depict the relationship between one's perceived skills and perceived challenges and the potential major psychological states resulting from this relationship. The major psychological states in the flow model are flow, apathy, boredom, and anxiety. In the flow state there is a perceived positive balance between challenges and skills. In the apathy state, there is also a perceived balance between challenges and skills, but the experience is negative. In the boredom state, the perceived skills are greater than the perceived challenges. Lastly, in the anxiety state, the perceived challenges are greater than the perceived skills.



*Figure 2.* The new flow model

*Note. Note.* Adapted from *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*, by M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 261, New York: Cambridge University Press. Adapted with permission (see Appendixes A and B).

The participants in this study were skilled professionals with expertise in marketing, project management, and information technology. They were achievement-oriented and highly motivated individuals. Prior research showed the flow model was more applicable in complex social activities where achievement played a role (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). This study confirmed the existence of flow, anxiety, and boredom as a relationship between perceived balances and perceived skills among skilled professional contract workers; apathy was not demonstrated in this study. This study also confirmed the existence of the flow state in complex organizations.

Experiences of flow occurred for all of the participants when they perceived they were able to meet the perceived challenges presented to them.

Csikszentmihalyi (1988) believed self-motivated people pursued higher levels of challenges and skills, with the goal of achieving an optimal experience itself. Troy confirmed this behavior when he moved from the boredom state to the flow state. In the boredom state, Troy perceived his skills were above the challenges of maintaining an existing system when compared to being creative and implementing a new system. As a result, Troy pursued a more challenging job that would match his perceived skills and moved from the boredom state to the flow state. Martha also demonstrated the pursuit of higher levels of challenges and skills when she discussed her contract-worker experience of flow. Despite the uncomfortable start to her contract-worker activities, overall Martha was excited about the potential opportunity for flow because she perceived it was an opportunity to learn and grow her skill sets.

This study also demonstrated the temporal nature of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Intense concentration and focus cannot be maintained for a long period of time. Once the participants' concentration was broken, they experienced stress and self-doubt. When in flow, they experienced neither stress nor worry emotions. During Troy's experience of flow as a contract worker he stated he liked the feeling of stress and working long hours. In this situation stress was not equivalent to anxiety. Stress for Troy was the building adrenaline he felt during his experiences of flow as a contract worker. Anxiety was demonstrated when the participants' concentration was broken, then external stimuli and influences were allowed into their focus. The anxiety state was also demonstrated during Lucy's experience as a permanent worker. She experienced too



much control and was in a state where her perceived challenges were greater than her perceived skills.

In addition to its temporal nature, the study also demonstrated that getting to the flow state sometimes could be a difficult journey. Larry, Martha, and Ken demonstrated moments of feeling frustrated, uncomfortable, and stressed before having experiences of flow. The difficulties of getting to the flow state can serve as distractions or external motivators, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

### *Flow at Work*

As in previous studies, this study confirmed that flow can be experienced at work and there were more frequent experiences of flow in a complex environment such as work (Allison & Duncan, 1987; Massimini et al., 1988). Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) showed that occupation affected the workers' flow experience the most at work when compared to the flow experience in leisure. Their participants' occupations ranged from skilled-labor jobs to more complex management roles and their study examined their participants' experiences while they were in their current role. The existing literature did not examine the impact a shift in work by the participant had on the experiences of flow.

The participants in this study were all skilled professional contract workers who experienced a shift in their work category; from permanent worker to contract worker. This study demonstrated it was possible for an individual to have an experience of flow in different work environments. However, the quality and the depth of the experiences of flow may not remain constant between the work environments. The experience of flow

was subjective and to determine the impact the work categories had on flow, one should consider the flow conditions and other work conditions specific to the work environment.

### *Quality of the Experience*

Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) also demonstrated that occupation affected the overall quality of the flow experiences and quality flow experiences occurred with higher frequencies. This study confirmed that quality flow experiences occurred with higher frequencies for both contract workers and permanent workers. This did not imply that either contract work or permanent work had a greater or lesser impact on flow. The frequencies of the experiences of flow were subjective and unique to the participants.

This study also confirmed that experiences of flow were meaningful when the participants were allowed to create and were absorbed in the activity (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). Lastly, this study demonstrated that professional growth and the ability to perform their desired activities contributed to the significance of the experiences of flow. When professional growth and the ability to perform were most present, the frequencies of the experiences of flow were higher.

### *Flow and Work Outcomes*

Flow is a subjective temporal state and experienced at that moment in time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Previous research has showed that flow was not a good predictor of job satisfaction or performance. Eisenberger et al. (2005) demonstrated that achievement-oriented workers had greater task interests when they were in flow, but greater task interests did not imply better job performance. Demerouti (2006) also showed that flow at work did not equate to better job performance. This research also confirmed that having an experience of flow did not equate to job satisfaction. Lucy

demonstrated this during her experience of flow as a permanent worker. Lucy had experiences of flow as a permanent worker, but in this same permanent-worker role, she also experienced the anxiety state. In this state she was not satisfied with her job and ultimately returned to contract work where she had more frequent experiences of flow. Lucy sought optimal experiences and placed herself in a position where her perceived skills were met with tasks she believed she could complete. Lucy's experiences did not imply that the other psychological states in the flow model could or could not predict job performance or satisfaction. However, it did confirm an individual would seek optimal experiences.

After the participants reflected about their activities, they also evaluated the entirety of their experiences based on their knowledge in relation to the qualities of the activities as contract workers and permanent workers. They wanted to identify their accumulation of rules, principles, and facts, and how they were successfully applied to the features in their work. The participants already believed they were competent and knew how to do their work. However, they also believed there was a balance between their knowledge and the nature of their work. This balance, or what the participants called fit, considered the totality of their experiences, which included experiences of flow, to determine if a fit existed between their knowledge and their work. Lucy believed her permanent work was not a fit, despite having experiences of flow.

#### *Section Summary*

The impact contract work and permanent work had on an individual's experience of flow varied. Flow was present in the different work categories and experiences of flow could occur at high frequencies as a contract worker or a permanent

worker for reasons specific to the individual. However, the individual may not experience flow at the same level or frequency when comparing contract work and permanent work. Contract work when compared to permanent work had an impact on an individual's experiences of flow when the following work conditions were present: (a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) the perception of contract work. These work conditions incorporated some of the flow conditions, had varied interrelationships, and represented complex parts of the organization's environment. The work category did not impact the quality of the experience of flow, but the quality was determined by the frequency of the experience of flow. Also, after accounting for the benefits of contract work, experiences of flow as a contract worker did have an impact on the decision to remain a contract worker.

#### Implications

The findings in this study have implications for contract workers and organizations. There are also implications for leadership education and future research.

#### *Contract Workers*

Contract work is not a new work category, but what is new is the increase in college-educated skilled professionals entering this work category. Brown (2009) coined this increase the Gig Economy and workers are entering this work category for various reasons. The participants' experiences of flow provided a glimpse into the various reasons for this influx. McKeown (2005) demonstrated that the reasons a permanent worker shifted to contract work ranged from negative experiences with the previous employer to a career option. Other reasons for this shift, which were demonstrated in this

study, included higher pay, more flexibility, and more opportunities to create.

Nevertheless, skilled professional contract workers may encounter additional realities regarding their careers, such as increased competition for the same contract work and the positive association between contract work and experiences of flow.

One interesting finding in this study was that skilled professional contract workers preferred to continue doing contract work despite having more frequent and quality experiences of flow as permanent workers. This did not imply that the benefits of contract work may outweigh the need to seek optimal experiences. However, this finding demonstrated skilled professional contract workers taking control of their careers. The choice to remain skilled professional contract workers may imply they are searching for an overall balance in their careers. Though contract work offered several benefits to workers, it also provided skilled professional contract workers with opportunities to pursue experiences of flow and possibly happiness at work.

Also, as the number of skilled professional contract workers entering the workforce increased, they may have had to compete against more than the usual number of skilled professionals for the same contract activity or assignment. Therefore, it may be important for skilled professional contract workers to identify what work activities motivate them. This could possibly help place them in a better position when competing for contract work. They would be better prepared to articulate to a potential client the type of activities they could accomplish and similarly they would be able to reject unfavorable contract work. In addition, individuals are in flow for a limited amount of time. Therefore, identifying the stimuli significant to skilled professional contract

workers may assist them in learning how to manage potential distracting stimuli and give attention to their perceived skills in relation to their perceived challenges.

Furthermore, there may be negative connotations associated with contract work. When there is a negative perception, then skilled professional contract workers may not enjoy their work or invest themselves fully into their work. This may limit potential opportunities for professional development and growth. This could also deter skilled professional workers from entering the contract-worker category, which may have a negative impact on the workforce. Having a positive perception or a positive mindset about contract work could lead to positive experiences as a skilled professional contract worker. Approaching work with a positive perception allows more opportunities for experiences of flow, which could lead to enjoyment and happiness at work.

### *Organizations*

Organizations could also play a part in improving the relationship between contract work and flow by preparing for the higher percentages of skilled professional workers entering the contract-worker category. The landscape of the workforce is changing and knowing how to better manage skilled professional workers could perhaps improve productivity and performance. Organizations are in a position to create an environment for potential opportunities of flow.

Work conditions—(a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community support, and (e) the perception of contract work—either encouraged or distracted skilled professional contract workers from potential experiences of flow. However, there may be interrelated and intricate parts of an organization that could contribute to or distract from

the experience of flow. Organizations may want to examine their constructed distractions or encouraging stimuli and the resulting impact on the skilled professional contract worker, the contract work, and experiences of flow. This could assist in identifying the behaviors organizations may want to encourage and suggested behaviors to suppress.

When creating a flow environment, it may be important for organizations to understand the temporal nature of flow. This study demonstrated the potential for organizational stimuli to permanently distract the skilled professional contract worker and miss potential experiences of flow. This may result in low productivity and a dissatisfied worker. Organizations could train their managers about how to motivate or encourage skilled professional contract workers through distracting moments. The possibility of losing a skilled professional contract worker who might have gained valuable knowledge about the activity and the organization could be a costly loss. It may benefit organizations to understand how to lead through those distracting moments, which could save the organization money and time.

Another implication for organizations is the potential for allowing their employees to move from a permanent-work structure to a contract-work structure. This might provide the flexibility some permanent workers desire without having to look for contract work. The permanent worker could work on targeted activities that might provide more frequent experiences of flow. Switching work structures in an organization could also allow the worker to maintain their established organization bonds and social networks.

One of the limitations of contract work is the lack of training and development opportunities (Redpath et al., 2009). Skilled professional contract workers are motivated

and they will seek complex opportunities for more complex learning and growth. Providing opportunities for skilled professional development may be one way for organizations to connect with skilled professional contract workers. The agencies that match skilled professional contract workers with clients could also provide the development and training skilled professional contract workers are seeking. Providing professional development may also allow both organizations and agencies to promote a positive image about contract work. Organizations could become more conscious of how they treat contract workers and view contract work in their organizations. Agencies also have the advantage of promoting and advertising skilled professional contract workers by promoting their skills, knowledge, and updated development, which may lead to the skilled professionals' credibility.

#### *Education*

Education programs for leaders may prepare their students to (a) understand the dynamics of skilled professional contract workers and their contributions to the workforce, (b) lead this workforce, and (c) prepare to be a member of this workforce and develop their leadership abilities in their activities. Leaders are expected to lead and manage a diverse workforce. This workforce includes both permanent and contract workers. Although, skilled professional contract workers are not full-time members of the organization, skilled professional contract workers are organization contributors and might benefit from organization feedback regarding their contributions. Leaders could learn how to communicate with this group. This population is sometimes forgotten in corporate communications; changes which may impact skilled professional contractors' work. Due to the temporal nature of flow, leaders may need to learn how to keep this



population engaged and how to provide opportunities for them to develop and grow. Leaders may need skills to create and reinvent the environment to keep this group focused and engaged.

Leaders may also need to know how to manage a rotating workforce. The nature of contract work is temporary; therefore, leaders may have a different group of skilled professional contract workers every 6 months. Leaders could learn how to maintain the momentum of the activity as new skilled professional contract workers are introduced to the team and the activity. As the work talent fluctuates, leaders may need to understand the importance of having a clear vision to help identify the right talent for the activity.

The skilled professional contract worker may also need leadership skills while working on an activity and could benefit from an education program for leaders. The nature of contract work has the skilled professional contract worker working in different organizations, meeting new people, and encountering different situations. The skilled professional contract worker may gain a deeper understanding of working with diverse populations. The skilled professional contract worker may gain skills needed to engage their team members in conversations, create bonds to establish credibility, and gain team member support. These leadership skills could be added to the skilled professional contract worker's body of knowledge.

#### *Further Research*

##### *Additional Organization Complexities and Flow*

Further research is recommended on flow and the relationship between the work conditions identified in this study: (a) organization complexity, (b) organization politics, (c) bonding with the organization and developing social networks, (d) expert community

support, and (e) the perception of contract work. As the number of skilled professional contract workers increases, the research could help gain understanding on how to create environments where less focus is on extrinsic rewards and more focus is on fostering the internal motivation to perform a good job. The working assumption is that skilled professional contract workers are self-motivated individuals and seek activities that are intrinsically rewarding. These work conditions also represent part of the complexities of an organization. Further research is suggested on identifying other complex parts of the organizations and analyzing their impacts on experiences of flow.

#### *Education Level and Flow*

Further research is also warranted on the level of the worker's education and flow. Workers with advanced degrees such as Master's or Doctorates in their field of expertise may have more opportunities for flow than workers with less advanced degrees. The working assumption is that workers with advanced degrees may have expertise in their field and would be offered more opportunities to create and to be in control of their work activities. Workers with advanced degrees may also have more quality experiences than workers with less advanced degrees.

#### *Age, Work-life Balance, and Flow*

Workers may be at a point in her their life where they want a work–life balance. Also, as workers become older they may demonstrate confidence in their expertise. Further research is suggested to explore to what extent age and years of one's knowledge had an impact on the experiences of flow. There is also some merit in exploring the relationships between work–life balance and the experiences of flow at work. As workers become older and progress in their careers they may have a clearer vision about their

career and may become more selective about the type of work they will accept. This could lead to more frequent opportunities for flow at work. Along with the work–life balance, the concept of fit and its relationship to experiences of flow is worth mentioning as a future research topic. The participants made it a point to distinguish between the balance of their knowledge and the nature of their activities, as opposed to the balance between their perceived challenges and perceived skills. As they reflected on the totality of their experiences, they examined how fit had an impact on their experiences of flow.

#### *Contract Work as Full-time Work and Flow*

Another area worth researching is examining the use of the contract-worker model as a form of full-time employment and its impact on the experiences of flow on the organization. This suggested research topic emerged when Francis stated she would remain a contract worker. However, at the time of this study she accepted a permanent role with an organization because it gave her the flexibility and the freedom to work in her respected field as if she was a contract worker. This occurrence warranted further exploration on contract-worker benefits, such as the flexibility to choose one’s activities and the flexibility to work for a defined period of time in a permanent-worker environment and its impact on the experiences of flow.

#### *International Workers and Flow*

Research on skilled professional contract workers working internationally and the impact on their experiences of flow would be another opportunity to explore. Suggested areas of exploration could be (a) comparing the quality of the experiences of flow between international skilled professional contract workers working in the United States and skilled professional contract workers working abroad, (b) exploring the extent the

culture of international skilled professional contract workers has an impact on the experiences of flow, and (c) exploring the extent skilled professional contract workers working in the United States have experiences of flow when compared to skilled professional contract workers working abroad. This research topic might provide insights on how international organizations treat contract workers when compared to U.S. organizations and suggest areas for improvement for U.S. organizations.

#### Personal Reflections

This study provided me with experiences of flow. There were moments late at night when I was so involved in the analysis that I did not realize the sun was about to rise. In my search for knowledge and discovery I also experienced moments of frustration and discomfort. During those frustrating times, I was distracted by work, family, and life, but I also had periods of self-doubt and questioned my abilities as a researcher.

What made this a quality experience was the realization of my leadership abilities. I knew I was capable of being a leader, but at the same time I had a difficult time perceiving this quality. Despite being a doctorate student in the Organization and Leadership Program in the School of Education and taking several courses on leadership, I could not easily realize this quality in myself. It was not until my contract assignment ended, which coincided with the conclusion of this study, that was I able to perceive this quality. At the end of my contract assignment I received praise and acknowledgement regarding the additional work I did above and beyond the assignment. It was then I realized I demonstrated what I preferred to call a quiet leadership style. As a result, my confidence level and how I approached my activities has changed. By being aware of my leadership style I now search for more complex activities that would benefit from my

style of leadership. The valuable lesson learned was that unless the individual perceives themselves to be capable of an action or a skill, then the experience of flow cannot occur.

Finally, the data gathered from the participants provided useful information about contract work and a deeper understanding about workers. Their experiences made me aware of the workers' motivation and the thought they put into their activities as skilled professional contract workers. I hope this awareness will encourage me and other researchers to continue exploring flow and its impact on leadership, organizations, and workers, and continue to contribute to the shaping of the work environment.

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## APPENDIXES

## Appendix A: Flow Model Approval Request

From: Loren Bryant [mailto:Loren.Bryant@cgu.edu]  
Sent: Wednesday, May 23, 2007 8:57 AM  
To: Johnson, Patricia  
Subject: RE: Doctoral student requesting permission to use ESM questions and figures

Patricia,

I will forward this on to him as soon as possible.

Loren Bryant  
Secretary  
Claremont Graduate University  
1021 North Dartmouth Avenue, Rm 130  
Claremont, CA 91711  
909.607.7878  
909.607.9104

-----Original Message-----

From: Johnson, Patricia [mailto:Patricia.Johnson@[REDACTED].com]  
Sent: Wednesday, May 23, 2007 8:40 AM  
To: Loren Bryant  
Cc: pcjohnson@usfca.edu  
Subject: FW: Doctoral student requesting permission to use ESM questions and figures

Good Morning Loren,

Below is the email I sent to Dr. Csikszentmihalyi in April. I'm currently working on my proposal and I hope to receive permission from Dr. Csikszentmihalyi before the start of the Fall semester. If I could get a response via email, then that would be great.

Thank you for your assistance.

Regards,  
Patricia Johnson  
pcjohnson@usfca.edu  
510-[REDACTED]

-----Original Message-----

From: pjoh[n] [REDACTED]  
To: miska@cgu.edu  
Sent: Tue, 3 Apr 2007 10:53 AM  
Subject: Doctoral student requesting permission to use ESM questions and figures

Hello Dr. Csikszentmihalyi,

My name is Patricia Johnson and I'm a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco in the School of Education focusing on organization and leadership. During my doctoral studies, I was exposed to your theory of flow and optimal experience. Since then, I've read a lot of your work and will use it as the theoretical foundation for my dissertation. My dissertation will explore the use of work stories to identify optimal experience.

I am requesting your permission to use the following in my dissertation:

1. In your book 'Optimal experience - psychological studies of flow in consciousness':
  - Figures 15.3 (pg 259), 15.4 (pg 261), and 16.1 (page 270)
  - Subset of the ESM questions from pages 255—258
2. In your book 'Flow - the psychology of optimal experience':
  - Flow diagram on page 74

Thank you for taking the time to read my request, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards,  
Patricia Johnson  
pcjohnson@usfca.edu  
510- [REDACTED]

## Appendix B: Flow Model Approval

From: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [mailto:miska@cgu.edu]  
Sent: Wednesday, May 30, 2007 1:47 PM  
To: pcjohnson@usfca.edu  
Cc: Loren Bryant  
Subject:

Go ahead with the inclusion in your PhD thesis of the citations you listed in your e-mail of May 30.

Good luck,

m.c.

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Research questions	Interview questions
<p>To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?</p>	<p>As a contract worker, describe an activity where you felt you were in the moment and nothing else seemed to matter.</p> <p>Was the activity challenging? Why?</p> <p>Do you remember what you were thinking about during that time? Tell me about it.</p> <p>Describe how you felt at that moment during the activity.</p>
<p>To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on flow?</p>	<p>Tell me what happened at work that allowed you to feel like you were in the moment, what made this experience different from your other experiences. Note for self: Make sure external factors such as work relationships with other employees, organizational conditions at that moment, etc., are discussed.</p> <p>Tell me about the communication style between yourself and the management team during this activity.</p> <p>Did you feel a drive, an incentive, or certain stimulus to complete this activity? Where did it come from?</p>
<p>To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience as compared to being a permanent worker?</p>	<p>At any time during the activity did you feel resourceful or inventive? What was it about the activity that made you feel this way?</p> <p>As you were doing the activity did you feel happy? Why?</p>

Research questions	Interview questions
<p>To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?</p>	<p>As a permanent worker, describe an activity where you felt you were in the moment and nothing else seemed to matter.</p> <p>Was the activity challenging? Why?</p> <p>Do you remember what you were thinking about during that time? Tell me about it.</p> <p>Describe how you felt at that moment during the activity.</p>
<p>To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on flow?</p>	<p>Tell me what happened at work that allowed you to feel like you were in the moment, what made this experience different from your other experiences. Note for self: Make sure external factors such as work relationships with other employees, organizational conditions at that moment, etc., are discussed.</p> <p>Tell me about the communication style between yourself and the management team during this activity.</p> <p>Did you feel a drive, an incentive, or certain stimulus to complete this activity? Where did it come from?</p>
<p>To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience as compared to being a permanent worker?</p>	<p>At any time during the activity did you feel resourceful or inventive? What was it about the activity that made you feel this way?</p> <p>As you were doing the activity did you feel happy? Why?</p>
<p>To what extent do the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work impact flow when compared to the benefits and constraints of permanent work?</p>	<p>Tell me, why you became a contract worker?</p> <p>How would you compare the benefits and constraints of being a skilled professional contract worker to being a permanent worker?</p> <p>If you had your choice, would you continue to be a contractor or would you return to permanent work? Why?</p>

## Appendix D: Relationship Between Flow and Research Questions

Flow condition or concept	Research questions
Benefits and constraints of being a skilled professional contract worker and the impact on flow	To what extent do the constraints and benefits of skilled professional contract work impact flow when compared to the benefits and constraints of permanent work?
Perception of Flow—The perception that one can meet the demands; perceived balance between challenges and skills.	To what extent do skilled professional contract workers perceive they have experienced flow compared to when they were permanent workers?
Action awareness Concentrating on the activity Autonomy Absorbed in activity Autotelic Clarity of goals Immediate feedback	To what extent do the conditions of skilled professional contract work impact the flow conditions when compared to the conditions of permanent work and its impact on flow?
Quality of Flow—determined by a person's psychological state. In the literature, this was measured by questions about motivation, concentration, creativity, happiness, and satisfaction.	To what extent does being a skilled professional contract worker impact the quality of the flow experience as compared to being a permanent worker?

## Appendix E: Participant Consent E-mail

Dear Mr. Doe:

I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco majoring in Organization and Leadership. I am doing a study to examine the experience of skilled professional contract workers during their work activities.

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are a skilled professional contract worker. I obtained your name from my current contact list of skilled professional colleagues. If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in one preliminary phone interview and two face-to-face interviews. The preliminary phone interview will be about ten minutes long to confirm if you qualify to participate in this research study. If you qualify, then two face-to-face interviews will be scheduled. The first face-to-face interview will be about ninety minutes in length to discuss your experiences at work. Afterwards, I will send you a summary of the first face-to-face interview for your review. The second face-to-face interview will be about thirty minutes in length and it will be conducted to review your feedback and to ask you additional questions for clarification.

It is possible that some of the interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, or stop participation at any time. Participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality. I will know that you were asked to participate in the research because I sent you this email. Study information will be coded and kept in locked files at all times. Only I will have access to the files.

While there will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of work experiences for skilled professional contract workers. There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study, nor will you be reimbursed for your participation in this study.

If you have questions about the research, you may contact me at (510) [REDACTED]. If you have further questions about the study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

**PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point.

If you agree to participate, please contact me at 510-375-3910 or pcjohnson@usfca.edu.

Thank you,

Patricia Johnson  
Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco



## Appendix F: Participant Screening Questions

I'm interested in contract workers who have work experiences where they felt like they were so into their work that nothing else mattered and the experience was a very positive experience. I'm going to ask you some questions to determine if you qualify to be in this study.

1. As a contract worker did you have experiences where you felt you were in the moment and you felt good about what you were doing?
2. Do you have competency in one of the following areas; Marketing, Project Management, Program Management, or Information Technology?
3. What is your educational background?
4. How many years of experience do you have as a contract worker?
5. Are you currently working as a contract worker?
6. When did you start working as a contract worker?
7. How many years of experience do you have as a permanent worker?
8. When were you last employed as a permanent worker?

## Appendix G: Informed Consent Form

University of San Francisco

### CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

#### **Purpose and Background**

Ms. Patricia Johnson, a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco majoring in Organization and Leadership is doing a study to examine the experience of skilled professional contract workers during their work activities.

I am being asked to participate because I am a skilled professional contract worker.

#### **Procedures**

If I agree to be a participant in this study, I will agree to:

1. Have an introductory meeting with Patricia Johnson about the study.
2. Be interviewed for the first time for about ninety minutes.
3. Review the summary of the first interview and to provide my feedback.
4. Be interviewed for a second time for about thirty minutes to review my interview summary feedback and to be asked additional clarifying questions by Ms. Patricia Johnson.
5. Audio recording of the interviews.
6. Ms. Patricia Johnson taking notes during both interview sessions.

#### **Risk and/or Discomforts**

1. It is possible that some of the questions on my work experiences may make me feel uncomfortable, but I am free to decline to answer any questions I do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality. Study records will be kept as confidential as is possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Study information will be coded and kept in locked files at all times. All digital data will be password protected. Only study personnel will have access to the files.
3. Because the time required for my participation may be up to 2 hours, I may become tired or bored.

#### **Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of flow experiences at work for skilled professional contract workers.

### **Costs/Financial Considerations**

There will be no financial payment for participating in this study.

### **Questions**

I have talked to Ms. Johnson about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about this study, I may call her at (510) [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with Ms. Johnson. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

### **Consent**

I have been given a copy of the “Research Subject’s Bill of Rights” and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as a student or employee at USF.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study>

Participant’s Signature

Date of Signature

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date of Signature

Research Subjects Bill of Rights

### **Research subjects can expect:**

1. To be told the extent to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained and of the possibility that specified individuals, internal and external regulatory agencies, or study sponsors may inspect

information in the medical record specifically related to participation in the clinical trial.

2. To be told of any benefits that may reasonably be expected from the research.
3. To be told of any reasonably foreseeable discomforts or risks.
4. To be told of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment that might be of benefit to the subject.
5. To be told of the procedures to be followed during the course of participation, especially those that are experimental in nature.
6. To be told that they may refuse to participate (participation is voluntary), and that declining to participate will not compromise access to services and will not result in penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled.
7. To be told about compensation and medical treatment if research related injury occurs and where further information may be obtained when participating in research involving more than minimal risk.
8. To be told whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the research, about the research subjects' rights and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject.
9. To be told of anticipated circumstances under which the investigator without regard to the subject's consent may terminate the subject's participation.
10. To be told of any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.

11. To be told of the consequences of a subjects' decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.
12. To be told that significant new findings developed during the course of the research that may relate to the subject's willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.
13. To be told the approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
14. To be told what the study is trying to find out;
15. To be told what will happen to me and whether any of the procedures, drugs, or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice;
16. To be told about the frequent and/or important risks, side effects, or discomforts of the things that will happen to me for research purposes;
17. To be told if I can expect any benefit from participating, and, if so, what the benefit might be;
18. To be told of the other choices I have and how they may be better or worse than being in the study; To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study;
19. To be told what sort of medical or psychological treatment is available if any complications arise;
20. To refuse to participate at all or to change my mind about participation after the study is started; if I were to make such a decision, it will not affect my right to receive the care or privileges I would receive if I were not in the study;

21. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form; and
22. To be free of pressure when considering whether I wish to agree to be in the study. If I have other questions, I should ask the researcher or the research assistant. In addition, I may contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS by calling (415) 422-6091, by electronic mail at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu), or by writing to USF IRBPHS, Department of Counseling Psychology, Education Building, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

## Appendix H: Protection of Human Subjects Approval

From: USF IRBPHS <irbphs@usfca.edu>  
Sent: Friday, June 25, 2010 9:10 AM  
To: pjohn [REDACTED]  
Cc: bloch@usfca.edu  
Subject: IRB Application #10-062 - Approved

June 25, 2010

Dear Ms. Johnson:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #10-062). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

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IRBPHS—University of San Francisco  
Counseling Psychology Department  
Education Building—Room 017  
2130 Fulton Street  
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080  
(415) 422-6091 (Message)  
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)

irbphs@usfca.edu

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<http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/irbphs/>




## Appendix I: Interview Summary Cover Letter

mm/dd/2010

Dear Participant,

We've concluded the first part of the interview session. I've transcribed your interview and provided you with a summary of the interview conducted on mm/dd/2010. Please review the summary results and feel free to write on the documents and (a) change any words or statements you believe better represents your responses during the interview, (b) strikeout any words or statements you believe did not represent your responses during the interview, and (c) add any words or statements you believe were not included in the summary. After you have conducted your review of the interview summary please mail me mail your edits in the envelope provided. We will meet again at our scheduled time, mm/dd/yy at hh:mm, for the second part of the interview session. In this session we will review your comments and I may ask you additional clarifying questions regarding our earlier discussions.

Regards,

Patricia Johnson  
Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
510-  
pcjohnson@usfca.edu