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# **CULTURAL TRANSPARENCY IN A VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT**

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**A Research Project**  
**Presented to the Faculty of**  
**The George L. Graziadio**  
**School of Business and Management**  
**Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**  
**of the Requirements for the Degree**  
**Master of Science**  
**in**  
**Organization Development**

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**by**  
**Jason Kujanen**  
**August 2015**

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This research project, completed by

JASON KUJANEN

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2015

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## Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in workplaces where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted with Cisco Systems, a high-technology company based in Silicon Valley, California, using an online survey and phone interviews to assess the organization's level of cultural transparency and the factors that create an open and engaging environment. Trust was found to be a key denominator in fostering transparency and employee engagement. Virtual tools, such as instant messaging, WebEx, and telepresence, foster cultural transparency and can be powerful supports for the creation and maintenance of trust, accountability, and communication among leaders and employees. While e-presence, leadership presence, social presence, and knowledge presence can be powerful attractors for trust, accountability, and communication, employees also highly valued engagement factors not aligned with transparency, such as employee growth, work/life balance, and collaboration. Engaging employees requires careful design of the workplace environment so that it reflects open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence. The results of the study indicate the importance of purposefully training new virtual leaders and hiring leaders who demonstrate key competencies that are valued in a transparent virtual work environment. Leaders play a significant role in creating and sustaining a culture of transparency and engagement. Leaders are encouraged to evaluate the level of trust and transparency in their organizations and consider what interventions may be most appropriate for enhancing trust and transparency in their organizations.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In today's globalized markets, companies increasingly have fewer physical, cultural, or organization boundaries (Cisco, 2008). Employees of the future need to know how to work flexibly and collaboratively with other employees when distributed across time zones and cultures, within an organizational infrastructure that supports virtual work arrangements.

For example, many high-technology start-up companies in Silicon Valley strive to have employees who are able and willing to work virtually. Companies not utilizing virtual workplaces are not able to attract strong talent, improve their productivity, reduce the costs associated with purchasing or renting building space to house employees, and demonstrate their environmental awareness and reduced footprint (e.g., by eliminating vehicle emissions that would be required for commuting) (Cisco, 2008). However, managing virtual workers is fraught with challenges. One such challenge is that virtual employees can experience marginality (Clemons & Kroth, 2011), sometimes feeling ignored as organizational outsiders because they are not physically present onsite. These feelings, in turn, can prompt psychological and even behavioral withdrawal and disengagement.

As a result, organizations with a virtual workforce are striving to identify the success factors for operating in virtual environments. *Cultures of transparency*, where the free flow of non-confidential information within an organization and between the organization and its many stakeholders is promoted (Bennis, Goleman, & O'Toole, 2008), are emerging as a best practice for creating conditions where virtual employees feel engaged in their work and with their organizations. Cultures of transparency also

have been associated with the sense of shared values, community, trust, collaboration, and support within teams and organizations (Bennis et al., 2008).

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in the workplace where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted within one high-technology organization. Four research questions were examined:

1. What degree of cultural transparency exists within the organization?
2. What factors produce an open virtual culture within the organization?
3. What factors promote employee engagement within the organization?
4. What role do leaders play in creating an engaging, transparent virtual work environment?

### **Study Setting**

The study was performed at Cisco Systems, which is an American multinational technology company headquartered in San Jose, California, that designs, manufactures, and sells networking equipment. The company currently has an employee population of 70,000+ worldwide with approximately 40% of its employees working remotely. Cisco enables 75% of its employees to work remotely on a part-time or full-time basis (Elkins & Gould, 2015).

Cisco was one of the first companies to sell commercially successful routers supporting multiple network protocols. Cisco's strategy is to solve its "customers' most important business challenges by delivering intelligent networks and technology architectures built on integrated products, services, and software platforms" (Cisco, 2014, Slide 4). Cisco's goal is to help shape the future of the Internet, while helping individuals, groups, and locations connect globally through virtual platforms.

Cisco's core values focus on the concept of "We" not "I." Cisco's culture is a collaborative environment, which strives for innovation, customer service, and social responsibility. These core values are aligned with Cisco's hiring and performance review process, so the culture is sustainable with these values. Cisco's core values are to "change the world," "focus intensely on customers," "make innovation happen," "respect and care for each other," "always do the right thing," and "win together" (Cisco, n.d.). Cisco's motto is "Tomorrow starts here" (Cisco, 2012b).

Cisco was founded in 1984 by a husband and wife team Len Bosack and Sandy Learner, along with Richard Troiano, who handled sales. Both Len and Sandy worked at Stanford University during this time and invented the multi-protocol router, which dealt with disparate local area protocols. This invention began when both Len and Sandy were unable to email each other from their different office locations on campus, due to technological constraints at the time. Since then, Cisco has had a concept of finding solutions to address specific customer challenges with technological infrastructure and platforms. Cisco has shaped the future of the Internet and has become the worldwide leader in networking, while transforming how people connect, communicate, and collaborate through technological interfaces. Mark Hamberlin, worldwide leader, global staffing at Cisco between 2010 and 2013, said, "Global workforce collaboration is a huge part of our DNA" (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 43).

During fiscal 2014, Cisco earned total revenue of \$47.1 billion globally. Today, Cisco has nearly 7,000 channel partners, in addition to 380 global sites doing business in 165+ countries. With 70,000+ employees, Cisco employs up to 25,000 engineers globally, which consists of 35% of its workforce. The remaining 65% of employees specialize in sales, services, and administrative functions.

In addition, the company has more than 19,000 patents and is consistently ranked #1 or #2 for most market segments the company serves, which include routing, telepresence, wireless LAN, switching, voice, web conferencing, X86 blade servers, storage area networks, and security. Cisco has been a leader in the telepresence industry since 2006 by developing and providing services and products that help secure networks while employees work virtually. With Cisco VPN, now called Cisco AnyConnect Secure Mobility Client, employees are empowered to work from anywhere regardless of physical location. It secures an organization's data while employees connect offsite using a corporate laptop or their personal mobile device. In 2006, Cisco telepresence was launched, revolutionizing high-definition video and spatial audio conferencing across multiple locations. In 2007, Cisco acquired WebEx, extending the company's vision for unified communications and collaboration in a virtual market. In 2010, Cisco acquired Tandberg, giving the company the most comprehensive and interoperable video conferencing portfolio in a \$34 billion market. Since Cisco has consistently been a leader in the telepresence market, the company was an optimal choice for this study.

Virtual leaders at Cisco are hired based on their ability to *C-LEAD*, an acronym for Collaborate, Learn, Execute, Accelerate, and Disrupt. When new leaders are hired for virtual management positions at Cisco, candidates are asked questions about real-life scenarios regarding these competencies. Questions are behavioral based to get a better understanding of how applicants demonstrate the competencies of C-LEAD. "For example, with regard to . . . [collaboration], we will ask applicants who might work remotely how they gain trust, build relationships, and work across boundaries," stated Mark Hamberlin, worldwide leader, global staffing at Cisco between 2010 and 2013 (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 43). In addition to these competencies, Cisco also looks for

additional qualities that make a virtual leader successful at Cisco, which include being proactive, excellent communication, and an ability to work in an environment where there is a lot of ambiguity (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 43).

In late 2010, Brandman University surveyed senior leaders and hiring managers in America's large and Fortune 500 companies (with a minimum of 5,000 employees). In this study (Bullock & Tucker Klein, 2011), Brandman University found that over 50% of the respondents said they are looking to hire managers who demonstrate excellent communication and collaboration skills (57%) and the ability to use software communication tools (56%) to define job responsibilities and expectations. More than half of the respondents hired managers who have the ability to build team trust and commitment without the benefit of being onsite at the workplace. When new virtual leaders are hired at Cisco, managers are taught how to use the virtual platforms available to them, such as Jabber (instant messaging) or video conferencing. New managers also receive training on how to manage and communicate effectively with remote employees and teams within the Cisco community.

While training is important, leadership presence is also fundamental in the Cisco virtual community. Managers are encouraged to establish relationships with employees working remotely, starting at the pre-onboarding phase of new hires. Managers are encouraged to reach out to new hires prior to their start date, which helps employees start the engagement process pre-Cisco. In summary, effective virtual managers at Cisco are those managers who take a proactive stance to create a culture of inclusion through engagement and feeling connected. When managers become more self-aware of their own behaviors, they are more able to adapt and embrace the Cisco culture when it relates

to engaging virtual employees. “Success often begins with leaders who will guide others along the path to triumph” (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 45).

### **Study Significance**

The present study generated findings about the extent to which one leading high-technology company exhibited transparent culture factors, what promotes a transparent culture, and whether these factors promoted virtual employees’ engagement. These findings will be useful for the study organization to help deepen the understanding of its employees and identify what they might need to do to enhance employees’ engagement. Moreover, study organizations that are similar to the present study company may find the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the data to be useful within their own settings.

### **Definitions**

Key terms related to this study were drawn from relevant bodies of literature and synthesized into specific definitions presented in this section. The definitions are revealed in no particular order:

1. Culture: “Pattern of shared tacit assumptions that was learned by a group . . . considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1999, p. 27).
2. Organizational culture: A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has “worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 2010, p. 17).



3. Transparency: The full, accurate, and timely disclosure of information. Accessibility and visibility of information related to business practices (“Transparency,” 2015).
4. Culture of transparency: The free flow of non-confidential information within an organization and between the organization and its many stakeholders (Bennis et al., 2008).
5. E-presence: The ability of technology to close the distance between manager and employee, employee and employee, and leadership and employee for information sharing, collaboration, and building trust (Clemons & Kroth, 2011).
6. Social presence: Being perceived as authentic, a real person, has been found to improve trust, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, and perceived learning (Clemons & Kroth, 2011).
7. Leadership presence: “The ability to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others in order to motivate and inspire them to achieve a desired outcome” (Halpern & Lubar, 2004, p. 8).
8. Knowledge presence: The ability to facilitate learning, sharing, and creation of knowledge within a group, organization, or society. Information that is either tacit or explicit which is accessible and shared freely (Duarte & Snyder, 2006).
9. Open communication: Open communication occurs when all parties are able to express ideas to one another, such as in a conversation or debate, without fear of retribution, paying the price, or losing face (Bennis et al., 2008; Holtz & Havens, 2009; Phillips & Gebler, 2007).

10. Virtual work: A population of people working together with a common purpose, but separately (Sheridan, 2012b).
11. Virtual employee: A person who works remotely or in a separate location, who is not physically visible to his or her manager or peers (Sheridan, 2012b).
12. Employee engagement: The connection employees have with the organization for which they work (Sheridan, 2012b).

### **Organization of the Study**

This chapter provided the background for the study. The study purpose and setting as well as its significance were discussed. Key definitions also were presented.

The next chapter provides a discussion of literature relevant to the present study. Studies on employee engagement, cultures of transparency, types of presence in virtual workplaces, and open communication are examined.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used in this project. Specifically, the research design as well as procedures for recruiting participants, collecting data, and analyzing data are described.

Chapter 4 reports the results of the study. Survey findings are presented first, followed by a report of the qualitative results. Areas of agreement and disagreement are summarized.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the study results. Key findings are summarized, conclusions drawn, limitations of this study cited, recommendations made, and suggestions for continued research discussed.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in the workplace where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted within one high-technology organization. Four research questions were examined:

1. What degree of cultural transparency exists within the organization?
2. What factors produce an open virtual culture within the organization?
3. What factors promote employee engagement within the organization?
4. What role do leaders play in creating an engaging, transparent virtual work environment?

This chapter reviews existing research related to the present study. It is organized into two sections, employee engagement and cultures of transparency. Within the cultures of transparency section, these cultures are defined and transparent culture factors are identified and discussed. Examples of transparent cultures within virtual workplaces also are provided.

#### Employee Engagement

Employee engagement can be impacted when an organization values and promotes a culture of transparency. Gallup defines “engaged employees as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace” (Adkins, 2015, para. 2). In 2014, Gallup conducted an employee engagement study with 80,837 employed adults and found that engagement scores increased only by approximately 2% since the prior year. While this score was the highest score since 2000, this score only represents 2.5 million employees nationwide. In this study, Gallup found that 31.5% of U.S. workers were engaged in their jobs, while 51% were not engaged, and 17.5% were

actively disengaged in 2014. When comparing job categories, engagement scores increased by approximately 4% for managers and executives since 2013. Managers and executives had the highest levels of engagement, at 38.4%. When comparing generational differences, traditionalists (Baby Boomers) continue to be the most engaged group, at 42.2%, while Millennials are the least engaged group, at 28.9%, which may be due to limited jobs available that match their talents and strengths (Adkins, 2015). In addition, the Baby Boomer generation is now retiring, with a new generation of Millennials taking their place in the workforce population. The new generation has a new attitude of working to live rather than living to work, while the Baby Boomers live to work (Sheridan, 2012b). Millennials value a work/life balance, where their job does not define who they are as people. A study conducted by Aon Hewitt (2014) noted that Millennials are setting the tone for employee engagement and employment contracts, which are impacting the perceptions of Generation X and Baby Boomers. The top four drivers globally are aligned with the top four drivers of Millennials, which are setting the pace for career opportunities, managing performance, pay and reputation, and communication.

While organizations may struggle with finding the right mix of engagement tools, resources, and activities to increase employee engagement for all employees at their work site, engaging remote employees can be more challenging, due to requiring a different set of skill sets or elements for an engaged virtual workforce. A variety of accessible engagement tools, resources, and activities is optimal in developing an engaged workforce (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Sheridan, 2012b).

Employee engagement aligned with transparency can be effective in a virtual work environment when organizations embrace a culture of communication channels which integrate with e-presence, social presence, knowledge presence, and leadership

presence (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Duarte & Snyder, 2006). Many organizations are unaware that 73% of today's workforce is not engaged, per International Statistics on Employee Engagement (Sheridan, 2012b). When employees are engaged, they have a strong sense of connection with an organization. Employees feel empowered, trusted, and eager to learn and grow with the company. Sheridan, author of *The Virtual Manager* and *Building a Magnetic Culture*, found that "engaged employees possess an intellectual commitment and emotional bond (pride, passion, enthusiasm) to their employer and an eagerness to exert extra discretionary effort and creativity, as well as a willingness to accept some personal ownership for their own level of engagement, all leading to maximize outcomes for themselves, for the organization, and for customers" (Sheridan, 2012a, p. 5). When employees are engaged, they are 3.5 times more likely to stay employed with their current employer, per HR Solutions Research Institute in Chicago (Sheridan, 2012b). With high engagement, customer service levels may increase, which creates happy customers. "Engaged employees are linked to satisfied customers with a correlation coefficient of 0.85" (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 72).

The HR Solutions Research Institute in Chicago found 10 top key drivers of employee engagement. These key drivers are recognition, career development, direct supervisor/manager leadership abilities, strategy and mission, job content (ability to do what one does best), senior management relationship with employees, open and effective communication, coworker satisfaction/cooperation, availability of resources to perform the job, and organizational culture/shared values (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 100). These engagement factors highlight both monetary and non-monetary engagement.

Furthermore, it was found that not all engagement factors interest all people and age groups (Adkins, 2015; Aon Hewitt, 2014; Sheridan, 2012b).

While there are many factors that engage employees, minimal research has been conducted on how transparency may impact employee engagement in a virtual work environment. A culture of transparency in a virtual work environment is much easier today, due to modern technology. With video conferencing, Skype, instant messaging, blogs, shared drives, podcasts, and online training modules, being transparent with sharing information openly has helped increase employee collaboration on tasks and projects.

With increased collaboration, employee engagement and productivity has increased, while company investments in virtual technology have proven to be cost-effective when reviewing the return on investment (Lazar, 2007). Under this sustainable model, companies are beginning to “encourage home-based work so they can save money in the office space, increase the flexibility of work hours, hire talented people wherever they might reside, move workers closer to customers, or decrease urban traffic congestion” (Putnam, 2001, p. 54). Today, the cost of office space is estimated to be \$10,000 per year for the average worker in the United States (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Organizations are also finding remote employees necessary to gain market share and a diverse customer base on the global stage. Global organizations are seeing a higher return on investment when employees are working and living in close proximity to customers. This means employees physically located near a customer can have a better understanding of the customer’s needs, which, in turn, improves employee engagement, customer service, and the final end product delivered (Sheridan, 2012b). In addition, organizations with a global virtual workforce can also remain competitive, due to providing 24-hour customer service. As organizations become more diverse on the global

stage, employees are frequently located in a distant, remote location across the globe. Meanwhile, employees who work remotely have a better quality of work life while limiting workday interruptions (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Sheridan, 2012b).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Telework Research Network found that an organization can save approximately \$11,000 per employee per year when working remotely. Employees working remotely could save between \$2,000 and \$7,000 a year, while at the same time being more productive due to less drive time to and from work (Global Workplace Analytics, n.d.). According to a study conducted by Brigham Young University, virtual workers and flextime employees were able to work an additional 19 hours per week before they began noticing a conflict with their personal lives outside of work (Samson, 2010). In addition, there is a 60% higher probability of remote workers being retained than employees in a traditional office setting, due to remote workers' intent to stay (Forczak, 2011).

Estimates of the number of people working remotely range from 15 to 30 million, based on a five-year study of trends in distance working. The number of people working remotely has increased significantly by 80% since 2005, per a study conducted by Global Workplace Analytics in 2013. By 2016, it is estimated to increase another 21%, which is an additional 4 million people working remotely (Global Workplace Analytics, n.d.). By 2020, one in three people will be hired to work remotely, according to an estimate from ODesk, an online marketplace for hiring remote workers (Meister, 2013).

While there are many positives for telecommuting, organizations can have a difficult time sustaining a virtual work environment that is engaged and productive. The reasons for this vary. Organizations often fail to understand how a culture of transparency

impacts employee engagement in a virtual work environment (Bennis et al., 2008; Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Holtz, 2008; Holtz & Havens, 2009). For example, remote employees must be supervised in different ways with more creative management techniques and sharper communication skills, which drives transparency through leadership presence. When hiring a remote employee, a manager must clearly define an employee's tasks and responsibilities and set expectations up front in how often they will communicate with each other, which can be daily or weekly (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Sheridan, 2012b). A void in communication longer than one week between a manager and an employee working remotely should be avoided at all costs since the lack of communication will isolate the employee from the manager, the company, and the culture the organization strives to create internally (Sheridan, 2012b). To begin a practice of communicating with a new remote employee, organizations may require a period of work in person at the corporate office. The period of time in the office could last from 1 week to 3 months before the employee is allowed to work from home. This period in the office helps develop a relationship with the manager and peers, which exhibits a spirit of collaboration (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Kolbenschlag, 2014; Sheridan, 2012b). While collaborating during this period, remote employees begin to adapt to the organization culture, communication preferences, knowledge, and best practices. The remote employee also develops a basis for future communications before working virtually. Davenport, the author of *Information Ecology*, stated that "Some face-to-face contact is often necessary to establish a human context for collaboration before electronic communication can proceed effectively" (1997, p. 189).



## **Cultures of Transparency**

Creating a culture of transparency begins with looking at the current state of the culture and reinforcing behaviors that characterize the desired state through recognition and rewards. Commonly in organizations, “Information isn’t shared simply because there is no requirement to share it. Transparent organizations identify information that shouldn’t be shared, and then make the rest available” (Holtz, 2008, p. 20). Companies whose cultures are vastly not transparent need to experience a transition period of becoming more transparent in order to embrace the principles of transparency. This transition period is mainly a period of communication and education by a company’s internal communication team. By leading this change, the communication team can begin sharing information that has no reason to be kept secret. “Changing the culture from one in which actions are hidden to one in which they are exposed to the light of day requires rational explanations of the benefits—to both the organization and individual employees—of changing to the new way of doing things” (p. 19).

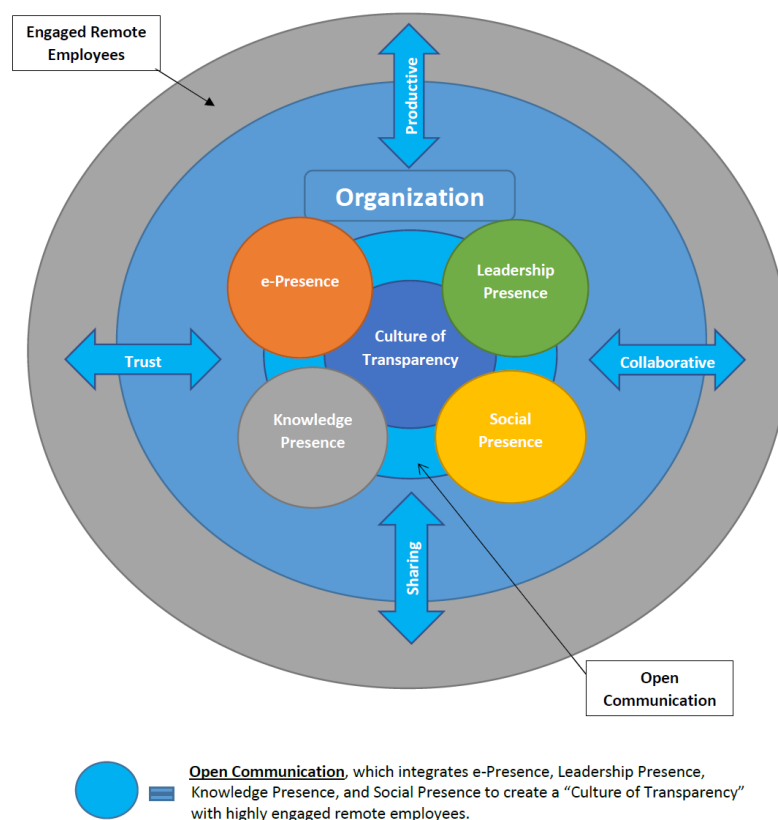
To implement change, a company must reinforce movement in the desired direction by rewarding employees and teams whose behaviors characterize the desired state of transparency (Bennis et al., 2008; Holtz & Havens, 2009). Recognition is the most important driver of an organization’s culture while reinforcing behaviors that embrace the company’s culture (Van Dyke, 2010). Recognition helps retain employees who embrace a culture the company is striving for; meanwhile, recognition reinforces the same behavior while acting as role models for other employees. The behavior displayed by these roles models begins a trickle-down effect process, where other employees begin to adapt the behaviors so they can be recognized and rewarded.

Employees rewarded for exhibiting non-transparent behaviors in their actions at work will only reinforce old behaviors, while making it more difficult for the organization to become a transparent work culture. It is easy for an employer to state that it values a culture of being open or that it has an open-door policy. This is not always the case when this statement may not be supported by the behaviors of the management team, the performance management system, or the reward systems (Phillips & Gebler, 2007). Therefore, it is important to hire the right employees and managers who believe in these values, making it possible to hold employees and management accountable for exhibiting a culture of transparency in their annual performance reviews. This can be done when pay and bonuses are directly linked to how well executives embrace the leadership attributes such as trust, collaboration, promoting integrity, or open communication, with higher performance targets set by an organization. By aligning key competencies with performance management, employees and leaders will be rewarded for exhibiting behaviors necessary to sustain a culture of transparency, which in turn impacts employee engagement in a virtual work environment. “When managers and other leaders demonstrate accountability, transparency, and fairness, employees see that their managers are able to walk the talk” (Phillips & Gebler, 2007, p. 3).

Creating a culture of transparency also requires the alignment of competencies with the company’s hiring process, such as developing behavioral interview questions (Sheridan, 2012b). These questions require job applicants to give an example of a time when they demonstrated a specific competency on the job, such as promoting a culture of collaboration and sharing information. By aligning key competencies with behavioral interview questions, the company will have a higher probability of hiring the right person to sustain a culture of transparency in a virtual work environment. By aligning key

competencies with the hiring and performance management process and tools, people are able to collaborate and work together toward a common goal and a common culture of transparency in a virtual work environment (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Sheridan, 2012b).

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework model guiding this study.



*Note:* Adapted from *Managing the Mobile Workforce: Leading, Building, and Sustaining Virtual Teams* (p. 58), by D. Clemons and D. Kroth, 2011, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model*

Clemons and Kroth (2011), DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010), Gibson and Cohen (2003), and Kohm and Nance (2009) identified steps for creating a culture of transparency with the use of free-flowing information:

1. “Format information to make it user friendly” for the general or targeted audience (Kohm & Nance, 2009, p. 69).
2. “Edit your writing. Words are more effective when there are fewer of them” (Kohm & Nance, 2009, p. 69).
3. Develop best practices for distributing different types of information—what type of information is shared best through email, video conference, company intranet, company blogs, website, shared drives, company cloud, company social groups, or social websites (Clemons & Kroth, 2011).
4. “Explain your thinking in clear language” so employees understand how you arrived at a decision even though they may disagree (Kohm & Nance, 2009, p. 69).
5. “Post charts and graphs displaying pertinent data” for visual learners in the organization (Kohm & Nance, 2009, p. 69).
6. Document processes and post in electronic format where they are easily accessible to employees in the office and remotely (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).
7. Share project updates by using a mixture of communication tools, such as email distribution lists; collaborative group technologies; project blogs; wikis; web-based bulletin boards; or a company/host shared drive, such as Google Docs, MS One Note, and SharePoint (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010).
8. Invest in technology capital, which allows information to be shared across multiple product, virtual, or software platforms. Consider interface ability of

technology and nature of work in an organization before investing (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).

**Transparent culture factors.** Examination of the literature on transparent cultures suggests that five characteristics are common, which are presented in more detail below: supportive technology (e-presence), employees' ready availability and connection to others (social presence), knowledge creation and sharing (knowledge presence), leaders' authentic connection with subordinates (leadership presence), and communication without fear of retribution (open communication). These factors are described in detail in the following sections. Employee engagement aligned with transparency can be more effective when organizations embrace communication channels that integrate with e-presence, social presence, knowledge presence, and leadership presence (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Duarte & Snyder, 2006).

***E-presence.*** The ability of technology to close the distance between managers and workers is continuously improving with newer technology such as email, Skype, instant messaging, video conferencing, blogs, and even holograms people can touch and feel in the making (Clemons & Kroth, 2011). E-presence is defined as having the technology, telepresence, virtual desktop, and collaborative software to implement a free flow of information internally for employees. Transparency is inescapable in the digital age, even when leaders resist it (Bennis et al., 2008).

Multiple research studies (Boule, 2008; Brake, 2006; Bullock & Tucker Klein, 2011; Cascio, 2000; Handy, 1995; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Ledford & Berge, 2008) have demonstrated that technology is the primary enabler of communication, trust, and collaboration within a virtual work environment. Without the right technology, communication, trust, and collaboration can be hindered, which, in turn, impact cultural

transparency. Organizations can benefit from the use of software communication tools, such as manager and employee blogs and company-wide social platforms used for private forums.

While envisioning an archetype of a remote worker, a manager may consider new media tools such as blogs, which are increasingly being used by companies to share information openly and with a larger audience. The use of blogs can help organizations operate, engage, educate, and communicate with employees across multiple time zones. Blogs can provide a chief executive officer of an organization the opportunity to speak in his or her own voice while giving company updates and exploring new approaches with employees. Speaking freely through a blog allows employees to see another side of a leader which is authentic and genuine (Holtz & Havens, 2009). Meanwhile, since a blog encourages a two-way conversation, a blog generates new ideas and success stories by employees, which can help drive a company in a successful direction. A chief executive officer who listens to what employees say is given access to a wealth of knowledge, which comes directly from the front line, the heart of where the work is completed. Eric Skiff, one of the founders of Tanooki Labs, stated: “We’ve all got an innate need to share what we know, and a platform to do that is as welcome to those who get to listen as it is to those who speak” (Holtz & Havens, 2009, p. 210). When a leader blogs to communicate with employees, both e-presence and leadership presence work simultaneously to deliver a culture of transparency.

While blogs may exist for executives, blogs also can be used by employees to share information about their jobs company-wide. Employees use blogs to share knowledge they believe other employees will find useful in their jobs. Information shared in the blog may pertain to updates on what employees are working on or even opinions

on what is taking place in their department. While most traditional managers fear having an internal employee blog, due to having no control over what is communicated, more and more companies with a virtual workforce are beginning to test the waters of having employee blogs to encourage a culture of transparency of free-flowing information. “A blog authored by the employee assigned to address the issue could not only keep employees up to date and informed, but facilitate a conversation about ways to handle the issue” (Holtz & Havens, 2009, p. 119).

While blogs can be effective in creating a culture of transparency in a virtual work environment, online company-wide social platforms, such as Cisco’s Integrated Workforce Experience (IWE), can be used by employees to share best practices and success stories. Within these social platforms, employees can create private forums to establish bonds with employees who have similar interests. These forums are called True North Groups, which was first defined by Bill George, co-author of *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership* (George & Sims, 2007). “A True North Group is a small, intimate group of peers who talk openly about personal and professional issues as well as their beliefs, values, and principles in a confidential setting” (George, n.d., para. 4). With instant accessibility to employees with similar interests, these forums quickly help employees feel more connected, even though an employee may be thousands of miles away from other employees connecting in the forum. Setting up True North Groups can be a quick win for organizations encouraging employees to engage virtually. “Virtual communities help the organization to feel smaller despite the large distance between locations” (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 149).

***Social presence.*** Social presence is the degree of being perceived as a real person, which improves trust, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, and perceived

learning within a community of virtual employees (Clemons & Kroth, 2011). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) defined social presence as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). A more modern definition of social presence theory was refined by Gunawardena (1995) to state: “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (p. 151). Social presence decreases in a group when communication channels are reduced. Group members begin to feel disconnected with one another when there is a lack of communication mediums available which help enhance social presence in the virtual work environment. Employees working at a distance may feel isolated from the workplace and from other employees, so social presence is important to help engage employees into the workplace and culture of the organization. Simple steps such as coaching and encouraging online participation, asking for self-introductions, and encouraging employees to email or instant message each other can increase social presence, which has little to no cost to the company. A face-to-face discussion has the highest level of social presence rather than an email message, since there are no visual cues or emotional connection. Interactions that are described as engaging, warm, intimate, emotionally connected, and lively are considered high in social presence. “Synchronous (same time) communications, such as face-to-face meetings, audioconferences, and videoconferences, have more social presence than asynchronous (different time) communications, such as email and voicemail, mostly because the former enable the spontaneous, back-and-forth exchanges that we associate with normal conversation” (Duarte & Snyder, 2006, p. 25).

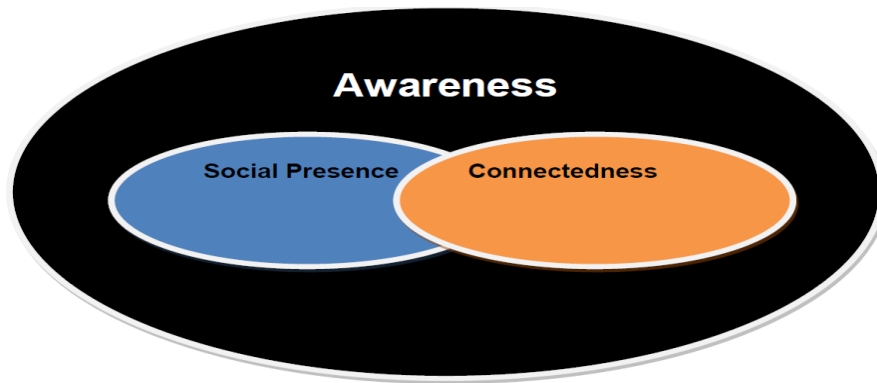
Employees working virtually do not necessarily have a need to feel connected emotionally with their jobs or places of employment. Social presence can be



misinterpreted when creating a culture of transparency. A leading motivating principle of social presence is connectedness, but it is not equivalent to social presence. The need for belonging and connectedness promotes social relationships. Rettie (2003) stated that “Social presence is a judgement of the perception of the other participant and/or of the medium, whereas connectedness is an emotional experience, evoked by, but independent of, the other’s presence” (p. 3). Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, and Stoner (2001) found connectedness relates to social presence through psychological involvement, but it does not give an employee access to another intelligence or psychological engagement. An employee can be aware of other employees online through instant messaging, which gives the employee a sense of connectedness; however, having a sense of awareness is not the same as social presence (Rettie, 2003).

The concepts of social presence and connectedness can be complementary to each other. IJsselsteijn (2003) found that the level of social presence is very low in awareness systems, but a sense of being connected and a feeling of being in touch with people can be strong. Under this definition, connectedness includes a high level of attraction to a person, group, or organization due to having a sense of sharing, belonging, and intimacy, which goes hand-in-hand with being open and transparent. The following diagram illustrates how both social presence and connectedness can complement each other when under the awareness of another person. Having an awareness of a person can occur with both social presence and connectedness or without one or the other. While the concept of connectedness is related to awareness, the awareness of presence can create an experience of connectedness (Rettie, 2003). Being aware of another person’s presence can trigger a connection or an emotion to that person (see Figure 2). However, a feeling of connectedness does not have to accompany a direct awareness of another person or

thing. For example, when a person texts another person, he or she may feel connected to the other person or vice versa; however, there is no social presence when texting another person. However, some people may argue that connectedness can occur without awareness, such as receiving a card in the mail, which only connects a person to an object rather than a person (Markopoulos IJsselsteijn, Huijnen, Romijn, & Philopoulos, 2003).



*Note.* Adapted from *Connectedness, Awareness and Social Presence* (p. 4), by R. M. Rettie, 2003. Kingston, England: Kingston University. Retrieved from <http://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/2106/1/Rettie.pdf>. Cited with permission.

**Figure 2**

***Interconnection of Social Presence, Connectedness, and Awareness***

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is facing a technology paradigm shift, due to innovations of multiple communication technologies that have a powerful effect in transforming how today's society communicates. Employees utilize these technologies that are virtual, digital, and personal in the workplace and at home. These same employees expect immediate access and response, due to their everyday use of these technologies (Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy-Ellison, & Shea, 2007). Smith (2007) found that over 80% of 18 to 34

year olds have an online presence. Additional resources highly demonstrate that social networking is a resource that should not be ignored.

While social presence is important for transparency, social presence strategies may differ between different cultures working remotely for one company. The “term of ‘community’ is changing from a geographic-specific to a relationship-specific” meaning (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 75). In some cultures, building relationships through communication takes precedence over sharing photographs to prevent employees from forming stereotypical notions of a person prior to truly knowing someone (Clemons & Kroth, 2011, p. 62). In these cultures, it is best to use online icebreakers, introductory surveys, and websites featuring photos from different countries so employees become familiar with other employees’ surroundings, cultures, and beliefs. Having transparency with photos from different countries opens the door for conversation with remote employees working in the United States and abroad. As organizations continue to expand globally, they are intentionally designing and forming a virtual environment conducive to cultural norms with the use of structural, hierarchical, and geographical tools (Clemons & Kroth, 2011).

Being transparent with the types of media available for employees to communicate gives employees a choice to use what they prefer; employees will then eventually use the preferred communication tool to build personal connections, relationships, trust, collaboration, and shared support within the virtual team (Clemons & Kroth, 2011). Employees can often feel disconnected when their preferred method of communication is not used by their employer (Sheridan, 2012b). For example, leadership may prefer multiple emails when communicating, so employees receive timely company updates; however, email may not be the preferred method of communication for

employees. The intent of the messages gets lost in translation. A quick win would be creating an open dialogue between management and virtual employees.

Like e-presence, social presence also depends on technology and the use of enterprise social software communication tools, such as email, group conferencing, audio and video conferencing, instant messaging, Internet forums, discussion forums, text chat, podcasts, blogs, weblogs, wikis, social networking search engines, social guides, social bookmarking, social libraries, peer-to-peer social networks, and both asynchronous and synchronous tools to increase engagement in a virtual workforce (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; IJsselsteijn, 2003).

The use of enterprise social software has many advantages for an organization that has employees working in multiple states and countries. Social software enables communication between groups as well as between employees and provides sharing of resources virtually. Social software also brings new tools, which allows for innovation and creation of knowledge (Kesim & Agaoglu, 2007). This demonstrates how social presence is integrated with knowledge presence through open communication.

The following elements offer specific ways an organization can build a stage of social presence for virtual employees (Woods & Ebersole, 2003):

1. Discussion Rooms/Forums: Allow for employees to engage in discussion rooms or forums to discuss defined topics, which allows exploration of learning, creativity, and sharing of information.
2. Immediacy: Refers to “those communication behaviors that enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 203).

Through selective verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors, intimacy can be enhanced between people while a sensed distance can be reduced. A

stronger sense of immediacy can be created by responding to emails or discussion forums within a 24-hour period.

3. **Live Chat/Instant Messaging:** Allows open communication through less formal channels, which builds trust and rapport quickly for virtual employees.
4. **Personalized Emails:** Managers who use personalized emails to employees help build rapport with employees working offsite. Rather than addressing emails to an entire department, managers can connect with employees one-on-one with a personal note. A personal email addressed to an employee allows the employee to recognize that he or she is not just a number in the company.
5. **Audio/Video Incorporated in Combination With Text-Based Content:** Incorporating a link to a taped or recorded meeting can be useful for employees connecting with the organization culture virtually. The use of video, such as Skype, during conference calls or instant messaging can convey additional communication cues that are positively associated with immediacy in face-to-face settings. Connecting to the person visually rather than by email, text, or telephone can greatly enhance a sense of online community, while building trust and transparency.
6. **Group Discussions:** Allow employees to discuss topics of interest under a threaded dialogue.
7. **Frequency:** Provide regular updates and feedback sessions, which enhance interaction and immediacy among employees.
8. **Private Places:** Set the stage of creating private places for employees to discuss topics, with limited or no access for leadership. By restricting management access, employees are enabled with hyper-personal

communication under “unique affordances of the medium that allows users to achieve more favorable impressions and greater levels of intimacy than those in parallel face-to-face activities” (Walther, 1997, p. 348).

Distance education experts Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) discovered that social presence can affect learner satisfaction. After testing several variables, they discovered that building a virtual culture of social presence included factors of self-disclosure, free expression, trust, conflict resolution, adaptability, and knowing how to welcome silence. This study demonstrates that social presence is important to build loyalty, identity, and support for the organization when working in a virtual workforce. Gunawardena and Zittle found that it is important for leaders to promote an environment of social presence if they want remote employees scattered all over the country or world to feel like they belong and relate to the organization. A social presence in the virtual workforce helps remote employees assimilate into the organizational culture quickly, which, in turn, builds a sense of community and high-performing teams that are engaged with the work that they do and with the company. However, it is important to note that the focus should be on the employees and their learning and not the tool itself (Smith, 2007).

It is important that managers understand that they play a key role with promoting an encouraging social presence in the virtual workforce. Their role is not limited to sending out the latest company updates but has an aim to help reduce the sense of isolation remote employees feel. The best leaders with a virtual work team will thrive if they know how to create a sense of online community that is trusting and loyal, with high engagement (Brake, 2006; Cascio, 2000; DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Kurtzberg, 2014; *Leading Virtual Teams*, 2010; Qualman, 2012; Sheridan, 2012b).

**Knowledge presence.** Multiple studies and research have also been performed to identify key variables impacting how an organization is able to sustain a transparent culture in a virtual working environment through the use of implicit and explicit knowledge. One study (Ledford & Berge, 2008) identified the importance of transferring tacit knowledge, which is knowledge contained inside the head and difficult to convey. Research suggests that adapting change strategies with proven distance education practices will help mitigate the geographical distance and increase tacit transfer within virtual teams. “The use of virtual teams provides opportunity for increased tacit transfer and application as knowledge transfer becomes time and place independent” (Ledford & Berge, 2008, Sec. 2.4.1). Another study found that a culture that facilitates learning, sharing, and creation of knowledge helps transfer tacit knowledge (Imel, 2003). In this study, virtual teams were more willing to transfer tacit knowledge when an organizational culture already existed that encouraged and fostered learning and knowledge sharing.

In addition to tacit knowledge, a culture of transparency also includes explicit knowledge (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Ledford & Berge, 2008). Explicit knowledge is that which has been articulated, documented, and communicated (Polanyi, 1962). The information contained in employee handbooks, documents, procedures, and company manuals provides a good example of explicit knowledge, which can be codified and stored in certain media and readily transmitted to others. The free flow of explicit knowledge is important internally in an organization; employees who need the information can make solid decisions quickly without putting the company or their jobs at risk (Clemons & Kroth, 2011).

However, structural impediments of an organization can disrupt the free flow of implicit and explicit information. If a company has too many management layers, good

decision making can be hampered due to management hoarding pertinent information from other managers. Management may also make decisions prior to sharing information with employees in order to appear decisive rather than weak or incompetent. Additional structural impediments include the use of group (team, unit, department, division) knowledge versus organization-level knowledge. How virtual teams act on knowledge depends on whether the knowledge is held by the team or in an organization-type data repository. Feeling part of a team allows employees to freely contribute their own personal knowledge with comments. When knowledge is maintained at an organization level, employees generally search for the knowledge rather than contribute new knowledge (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).

***Leadership presence.*** When leading a department, a unit, or an organization, visibility is not just having an open-door policy. Leadership visibility is also having a presence. Presence “starts with understanding the nature of wholes, and how parts and wholes are interrelated” (Clemons & Kroth, 2011, p. 54). When a leader is truly present, he or she is “mindful and open to experience, to learning, to others, to nature, and to the interconnected ecology of the world” (p. 54). Leaders of transparent companies exhibit presence by being accessible, genuine, and straightforward when communicating with an audience, including employees (Holtz & Havens, 2009). When a leader exhibits presence, the leader welcomes unsettling information that may challenge the status quo (Bennis et al., 2008). Dialogue occurs with respect and active listening that is positive, purposeful, constructive, and valued. If a leader’s communication and concern are not demonstrated as being genuine, the message will be overlooked and employees may become more disengaged than engaged. Holtz and Havens (2009) found that “transparency is typically most apparent in action” (p. 210).



Employees can get an intimate glimpse of who a leader really is by seeing how a leader responds and deals with immediate input from others. When a leader values real-time discussion, employees embrace and hear an honest voice. If a leader pitches what he or she thinks should be said, rather than speaking from the heart, employees will challenge the status quo (Holtz & Havens, 2009). “Effective, comprehensive, timely, and most importantly, genuine conversation is the most important way to bridge the gap between the main office and virtual employees. This is the foundation for success” (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 154). In late 2010, Brandman University found that close to 60% of large companies (with 5,000+ employees) with virtual leaders experience a high barrier of earning trust with their virtual teams (Bullock & Tucker Klein, 2011). While being truly present by being open and genuine, power is sometimes an overlooked strength of leadership presence.

Leadership presence also is exhibited when people in power are supportive of those who report to them and are able to have candid conversations. Leaders who are in touch with their power emotionally demonstrate their importance in multiple ways to maintain power. Many leaders lack an understanding of the importance of visibility as power (Bal, Campbell, Steed, & Meddings, 2008). “Transparency, trust, and speaking truth to power are complexly interrelated ethical and organizational concepts” (Bennis et al., 2008, p. 65).

**Open communication.** “Communication truly is the vehicle through which engagement exists” (Sheridan, 2012b, p. 122). While e-presence, social presence, knowledge presence, and leadership presence can be highly impactful on employee engagement in virtual work environments, open communication must be present in a culture of transparency while integrating all four key factors as a whole. Each factor must

have a level of open communication, which is earned through trust, for a culture of transparency to emerge. Trust is the gatekeeper for open communication. “Charles Handy points out that trust is one of the foundations for performance in a virtual setting” (Duarte & Snyder, 2006, p. 85). With low trust, employees look inward to protect their own turf while focusing on others. Employees tend to protect their own interests and do not believe the information they receive is believable or reliable. Without trust, open communication will fail, which continues a cycle of a non-transparent culture. Cultures where employees are free to speak openly tend to sustain a high level of integrity and trust. When leaders fail to promote transparency and openness in the workplace, there may be confusion and lack of awareness, employee isolation, low productivity, and a perceived lack of fairness (Phillips & Gebler, 2007). Leadership trust is earned over time with each interaction. When trust is lost, it is more difficult to earn back (Whipple, 2009).

While leaders may inertly create a culture of closed communication, employees may also contribute, due to personal fear. While people generally want to be trusted, trusting others while speaking freely can be painful. Being open and truthful is not always easy for people, due to having a fear of conflict or a fear of being perceived as a troublemaker. The following fears prevent a culture of transparency and openness and must be addressed quickly to sustain a culture of transparency in a virtual work environment: fear of retribution, fear of hurting another person’s feelings, fear of change, fear of being disliked, fear of losing support, fear of paying the price, fear of losing competitive advantage, and fear of losing face (Phillips & Gebler, 2007). The following case demonstrates how Boeing created a culture of open communication and transparency back in 2007.

In 2007, Boeing was able to transition its culture of silence to a culture of open communication. Since 2007, the company pays attention to its employees, first, to help sustain profit with longevity. The chief executive officer created a culture where it is safe for employees to speak and take risks while questioning activities. The chief executive officer earned trust by remembering employees' names, by being present while paying attention to employee presentations, and with his genuine respect for all employees (Phillips & Gebler, 2007).

**Examples of transparent cultures within virtual workplaces.** This section provides examples of three companies found in the literature about transparent cultures within virtual workplaces: Cisco, ISB Global, and LinkedIn.

In 2011, Cisco was experiencing problems with information and content being siloed within the organization, which led to having many repositories. There were multiple information technology (IT) platforms being used that were unable to share information easily between platforms. Employees found it difficult to share or add value to content, which was often static or no longer relevant. Yet Cisco's IT division had a vision to address these issues and unify the business and technology through a services-oriented organization. The IT division wanted to create a culture of innovation by sharing new ideas freely through open discussion while driving innovation and diverse solutions. Cisco IT wanted to "develop and nurture an open, borderless, transparent community that works cross-functionally and geographically to drive productivity" (Cisco, 2011, p. 1).

For this vision to take place, Cisco had to enable employees to easily connect with colleagues, information, and business processes within a centralized environment. The IT community at Cisco would be enabled to collaborate, share knowledge freely, and easily find information and expertise with a one-stop-shop solution. As a result, Cisco adopted

the IWE (Integrated Workforce Experience) for IT, which is an information systems platform built as a “foundational community and gateway to all information and resources related to the IT organization” (Cisco, 2011, p. 2). Cisco also developed a platform called Cisco Virtual Office, which provides remote working capabilities, enables collaboration and video for increased productivity, and supports a contingent workforce while keeping costs under control. Today, more than 25,000 employees at Cisco are connected with Cisco Virtual Office. Finally, Cisco also developed a virtual product called unified communications technologies, which allow employees to conduct virtual interactions through the use of teleconference, visual tools, instant messaging, virtual private network, and blogs. Impromptu or scheduled voice, video, and web-based communications can be connected by phones, instant messaging (IM), and communications clients from web browsers and calendars (Cisco, 2012a).

Another company that demonstrates e-presence is ISB Global located in London. ISB Global uses the term application protocol interface to describe how managers in the virtual workforce put structures and processes into place to connect employees virtually. ISB Global encourages its managers to be proactive by anticipating what remote employees need to be engaged and productive prior to performance being hindered. Managers are enabled to create a collaborative sound structure, where employees are able to connect with each other virtually, to openly share information pertaining to jobs, tasks, processes, projects, values, culture, company news, or policy updates.

Another company that demonstrates e-presence is LinkedIn. In 2015, the company operated the world’s largest online professional network that has 350 million users globally. The company uses its “LinkedIn Company Group” as an open forum for

internal employees. This open forum is used to share new ideas and opinions openly without any fear of retaliation (Sheridan, 2012b).

## Chapter 3

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in the workplace where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted within one high-technology organization. Four research questions were examined:

1. What degree of cultural transparency exists within the organization?
2. What factors produce an open virtual culture within the organization?
3. What factors promote employee engagement within the organization?
4. What role do leaders play in creating an engaging, transparent virtual work environment?

This chapter describes the methods used in the present study. The research design is described first. The procedures used to recruit participants and to collect and analyze data are described next.

#### Research Design

The study used a sequential mixed-methods design. In a mixed-method study, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected to provide both measures of and in-depth insights about the phenomena being examined (Creswell, 2009). A survey was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data about participants' views of their culture and the factors that most engage them. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather participants' insights about the transparent culture factors and what impact these factors have on engagement.

## Participants

The stratified random sample of 150 employees at Cisco who received the survey invitation was composed of 5% executives, 15% managers with direct reports, and 80% frontline staff, which included a cross section of employees in the United States from different departments. This sample had varying experience with working remotely: Executives work in the corporate offices but work with remote employees on a regular basis. Managers work remotely part time and also work with remote employees. Frontline staff work remotely exclusively. All 150 employees received the study invitation by email (see Appendix A), and 96 began or completed a survey, for a 64% response rate. Additionally, 15 interviews were conducted with a composition of 20% supervisors, 13% managers, and 67% frontline staff. All interviewees were volunteers who signed interview consent forms (see Appendix B).

## Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using two approaches: a questionnaire and one-on-one interviews. The following sections describe these approaches in detail.

**Questionnaire.** An original 39-item questionnaire was created for use in the present study (see Appendix C). Each question was customized and aligned with one of the five culture transparency factors: e-presence, social presence, knowledge presence, leadership presence, and open communication. The online questionnaire began with a statement of consent and required respondents to indicate their consent before they were allowed to proceed to the next page, where two demographic questions gathered their gender and age category (e.g., 20-29 years old). Participants then were presented with definitions of the central constructs of the study, defining culture of transparency and its

components: e-presence, social presence, leadership presence, knowledge presence, and open communication.

Next participants were asked to respond to 34 questionnaire items about transparency in the culture specific to the five elements (see Table 1). Participants indicated their degree of agreement using a Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

The transparent cultural elements section was followed by an open-ended question about the participants' personal top three factors for an open and transparent virtual work environment. Next, participants were asked to rank 15 engagement factors in order from 1 (most important for engagement) to 15 (least important for engagement). Participants also had an opportunity to add a factor not listed. Table 2 displays the 15 engagement factors and their association with transparent culture elements. Importantly, participants were presented with engagement factors that were not associated with a culture of transparency to avoid biasing the participant answers.

The questionnaire closed with a final open-ended question that solicited additional thoughts from respondents about their virtual experiences as remote employees.



**Table 1*****Questionnaire Items: Transparent Cultural Elements***

<b>Scale (Transparent Culture Element)</b>	<b>Items</b>
e-Presence	<p>3. I have the tools which enable me to do my job effectively while working virtually.</p> <p>4. I have the tools which enable me to do my job effectively with employees who work remotely.</p> <p>33. My manager promotes and encourages employees to collaborate through online communication tools such as company blogs, instant messaging, audio/video, group conferencing, online forums/discussion rooms, Skype, group discussion threads, or company-related Facebook pages.</p> <p>34. Online social tools are available and accessible for communication with employees.</p>
Social Presence	<p>31. I feel connected with other employees in my company.</p> <p>32. I feel connected with other employees on my team.</p> <p>35. There is a strong sense of an online social community where I work.</p>
Leadership Presence	<p>13. Senior management and employees trust each other.</p> <p>29. My manager is always consistent when administering policies concerning employees.</p> <p>30. I receive useful and constructive feedback from my manager.</p>
Knowledge Presence	<p>8. Key messages and direction are communicated quickly and directly with employees.</p> <p>10. I trust the information I receive.</p> <p>11. I understand how my role contributes to achieving business outcomes.</p> <p>14. I have the information I need to do my work right.</p> <p>15. I have the information I need to make critical decisions.</p> <p>16. Accessibility of information is readily available to complete my job tasks.</p> <p>26. The necessary information systems are in place and accessible for me to get my job done.</p> <p>27. I understand how my work directly contributes to the overall success of the organization.</p> <p>28. I am familiar with and understand the organization's strategic goals.</p>
Open Communication	<p>5. When differences of opinion arise, people are willing to disagree with their manager.</p> <p>6. People are able to be honest and direct with opinions and ideas.</p> <p>7. It is ok to disagree with ideas—regardless of whose idea it is.</p> <p>9. I have an opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect me.</p> <p>12. Communication between senior leaders and employees is good in my organization.</p> <p>17. My supervisor keeps me informed of company policies, processes, goals, milestones, actions.</p> <p>18. At work, my opinion seems to count.</p> <p>19. My organization has a safe working environment.</p> <p>20. I am satisfied with the culture of my workplace.</p> <p>21. I can disagree with my supervisor without fear of getting in trouble.</p> <p>22. I am comfortable sharing my opinions at work.</p> <p>23. We work to attract, develop, and retain people with diverse backgrounds.</p> <p>24. Senior management is genuinely interested in employee opinions and ideas.</p> <p>25. People with different ideas are valued in this organization.</p> <p>36. My employer promotes a culture of learning, sharing, and creation of knowledge.</p>

**Table 2*****Engagement Factors List for Ranking***

<b>Engagement Factor</b>	<b>Associated Transparent Culture Element</b>
Senior leadership presence	Leadership Presence
Accessibility of virtual technology platforms	e-Presence
Regular interaction with manager	Leadership Presence
Trust	Leadership Presence
Opportunities for growth	None
Accessibility of management	Leadership Presence
Challenging projects	None
Compensation	None
Feedback	Leadership Presence
Teamwork/collaboration	None
Rewards and recognition	None
Work/life balance	None
Performance and accountability	None
Personal expression—open communication	Open Communication
Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies	e-Presence
Other: _____	

**Interview.** One-on-one telephone interviews were conducted to gather in-depth data about the organization’s transparency of culture and the factors that engage the interviewees. The interview script in Appendix D was used to guide the conversation. The conversation began with an introduction to the study and a presentation of the survey results.

The first set of interview questions asked participants to indicate and explain their agreement or disagreement with the results that a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual workforce. The first question asked, “Do you agree with the overall results of whether a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual workforce?” A follow-up question asked, “What factor below do you find is the most necessary for employee engagement in a virtual work environment?” Participants were then asked if there were any missing factors not included in the study. The second question asked, “How do you

make sense of the following ranking results (1 being most favorable) for what makes an employee feel more alive and engaged at work? Is there any ranking you strongly disagree or agree with? Why?” The third question asked, “How do you make sense of the responses to question #37 (survey), which is an open-ended question regarding an employee’s personal top three factors for being open or transparent in a virtual work environment?”

The second set of interview questions asked participants about their experiences of engagement and then probed for participant views about experiences with management and accessing information. Finally, participants were asked to share anything else they believed was relevant to the study.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Survey data were analyzed as follows:

1. Mean and standard deviation statistics were calculated for each transparent culture scale. Mean scores were compared among age groups and between genders to detect any significant differences.
2. Open-ended engagement factors and open-ended responses were analyzed, and common themes were determined. In addition to determining key themes, open-ended engagement factors then were compared to the transparent culture elements to determine if transparent culture elements ranked higher for engagement in a virtual workforce.
3. Mean and standard deviation statistics were calculated for the 15 engagement factors individually. Mean scores were compared among age groups and between genders to detect any significant differences.

4. Subscale mean scores were calculated for transparent culture elements and non-elements (those factors that were not necessarily associated with a transparent culture). Paired sample *t*-tests were run to determine whether participants rated culture elements significantly differently than other elements as they pertained to engagement.

Interview data were analyzed using the following steps:

1. Transcripts were reviewed and any needed corrections were made.
2. Data were organized so that all participant responses were listed for each question one by one.
3. The complete data set for each question was reviewed, and codes were identified on an ad hoc basis. Data were organized and reorganized to reflect the emerging coding structure. Each question was reviewed one by one in this manner.
4. The coding structure was reviewed to confirm its accuracy. Codes were separated, combined, or placed in a hierarchy of supraordinate and subordinate codes, as appropriate.
5. A second rater reviewed the analysis and identified any questions or issues. These were discussed and resolved.

### **Summary**

The present mixed-methods study was conducted at Cisco Systems located in Silicon Valley in California. The organization's cultural transparency and the factors that create open virtual environments and employee engagement were measured using survey and interview methods. Survey data were analyzed using statistical and content analysis.

Interview data were examined using content analysis. The next chapter reports the findings of the study.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in workplaces where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted within one high-technology organization. Four research questions were examined:

1. What degree of cultural transparency exists within the organization?
2. What factors produce an open virtual culture within the organization?
3. What factors promote employee engagement within the organization?
4. What role do leaders play in creating an engaging, transparent virtual work environment?

This chapter reports the results that emerged from the study. Questionnaire findings are presented first, followed by a report of the interview findings.

#### Questionnaire Findings

A total of 95 respondents completed the survey. Participants responded to all of the questions in the survey except the last three questions, which included a forced-ranking question ( $N = 78$ ) and two open-ended questions regarding top three transparency factors ( $N = 66$ ) and additional information to share ( $N = 14$ ). More than half of the respondents were female (63%), and 38% were 30-39 years old (see Table 3). Very few (4%) were over age 50.

**Table 3**

#### *Participant Demographics*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
Male: 33 (35%)	20-29 years old: 31 (33%)
Female: 60 (63%)	30-39 years old: 36 (38%)
No answer: 2 (2%)	40-49 years old: 24 (25%)
	50-59 years old: 4 (4%)

The study questionnaire was created for the present research. Therefore, it was necessary to estimate the reliability of the transparency culture scale and its five subscales (see Table 4). Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) asserted that an alpha coefficient of .70 or greater reflects sufficient reliability. Using the 34 total items, the overall scale had high reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Three subscales also had sufficient reliability, although leadership presence ( $N = 3$ ,  $\alpha = .65$ ) and social presence ( $N = 3$ ,  $\alpha = .53$ ) did not—likely due to having only three items per scale. Measures using these latter two scales should be considered with great caution.

**Table 4**

*Reliability Statistics*

Scale	N Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Open Communication	15	.88
Knowledge Presence	9	.80
E-Presence	4	.75
Leadership Presence	3	.65
Social Presence	3	.53
Overall	34	.92

**Cultural transparency.** Descriptive statistics were calculated for the transparency culture scale for the sample as a whole (see Table 5). The highest scores were reported for e-presence ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = .67$ ), indicating that respondents believed they had adequate tools to support communication in a virtual workplace. The lowest scores were reported for leadership presence ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), indicating that respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that leaders authentically connected with subordinates. For the remaining scales, participants generally agreed that cultural transparency exists in their organization.

**Table 5*****Descriptive Statistics***

Scale	N	Mean	SD
E-Presence	82	4.38	.67
Knowledge Presence	83	3.91	.75
Leadership Presence	84	3.67	.90
Social Presence	84	3.90	.89
Open Communication	84	3.80	.86
Overall	74	3.89	.84

N = 95

1 = Strongly disagree transparency exists

5 = Strongly agree transparency exists

Mean scores for the transparency culture scale then were compared for men and women (see Table 6). Women rated three scales significantly higher than men did: e-presence (mean diff. = .10,  $p = .022$ ), leadership presence (mean diff. = .26,  $p = .022$ ), and social presence (mean diff. = .11,  $p = .026$ ). These results suggest that with regard to communication tools and technology, leadership authenticity and connection with subordinates, and feeling of being present despite the virtual workplace, women believed there was more transparency in the workplace than did men.

**Table 6*****Independent Samples t-Test for Gender***

Scale	Male N = 32 Mean (SD)	Female N = 52 Mean (SD)	t	df	sig.
E-Presence	4.31 (.49)	4.41 (.49)	-2.343	82	.022*
Knowledge Presence	3.76 (.37)	3.98 (.47)	-.862	82	.391
Leadership Presence	3.51 (.67)	3.77 (.66)	-2.339	82	.022*
Social Presence	3.82 (.64)	3.93 (.61)	-2.264	82	.026*
Open Communication	3.63 (.51)	3.89 (.49)	-.738	82	.463
Overall	3.75 (.40)	3.96 (.42)	-1.650	82	.103

N = 95; \*significant at the .05 level

1 = Strongly disagree transparency exists; 5 = Strongly agree transparency exists

Mean scale scores then were compared across age groups using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether any significant differences existed (see Table 7). The ANOVA results revealed no significant differences.



**Table 7**  
**Analysis of Variance by Age**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
E-Presence	Between Groups	.619	3	.206	.867	.462
	Within Groups	19.512	82	.238		
	Total	20.131	85			
Knowledge Presence	Between Groups	.629	3	.210	1.084	.361
	Within Groups	15.846	82	.193		
	Total	16.475	85			
Leadership Presence	Between Groups	1.772	3	.591	1.314	.275
	Within Groups	36.841	82	.449		
	Total	38.612	85			
Social Presence	Between Groups	.378	3	.126	.323	.809
	Within Groups	32.005	82	.390		
	Total	32.383	85			
Open Communication	Between Groups	1.425	3	.475	1.868	.141
	Within Groups	20.841	82	.254		
	Total	22.265	85			
Overall	Between Groups	.590	3	.197	1.109	.350
	Within Groups	14.539	82	.177		
	Total	15.128	85			

N = 95

**Factors producing open virtual cultures.** The questionnaire asked participants to identify the top three factors that support an open and transparent virtual work environment (see Table 8). Analysis of the open-ended responses revealed that participants most commonly named transparent culture factors as supporting an open, transparent virtual work environment ( $n = 58$ , 88% of all first-ranked factors;  $n = 151$ , 78% of all factors). Of these, the most commonly cited factor across the top three factors was adequate communication tools and technology, which corresponds to e-presence ( $n = 49$ , 25% across all three rankings). Leadership was the second most commonly cited factor across the top three factors ( $n = 44$ , 23% across all three rankings), which was enabled by having an e-presence. Participants stressed the importance of leaders providing clear direction, goals, and objectives; giving helpful feedback; being honest; and being trustworthy. When reviewing individual rankings separately under transparent culture factors, continuous and direct communication ranked first ( $n = 19$ , 29%), while

adequate communication tools and technology ranked second ( $n = 16, 24\%$ ). Meanwhile, leadership consistently ranked second after both continuous and direct communication and adequate communication tools and technology, which are both necessary to sustain leadership presence. Other factors beyond transparent culture factors were cited 43 times (22%) across all three rankings. These factors concerned the organizational culture ( $n = 26, 13\%$ ) and the nature of the work ( $n = 17, 9\%$ ).

**Table 8**

***Top Three Factors Supporting an Open and Transparent Virtual Work Environment***

Factor	Corresponding Transparent Culture Element	Rank 1 $N = 66$	Rank 2 $N = 66$	Rank 3 $N = 62$	All Rankings $N = 194$
<b>Transparent Culture Factors</b>		<b>58 (88%)</b>	<b>47 (71%)</b>	<b>46 (74%)</b>	<b>151 (78%)</b>
Adequate communication tools and technology	E-Presence	12 (18%)	16 (24%)	21 (34%)	49 (25%)
Leadership Clear direction, goals, and objectives Feedback Honesty Being trustworthy	Leadership Presence	17 (26%)	15 (23%)	12 (19%)	44 (23%)
Continuous and direct communication	Open Communication	19 (29%)	4 (6%)	3 (5%)	26 (14%)
Sharing knowledge and timely, direct information about decisions and directions	Knowledge Presence	8 (12%)	9 (14%)	5 (8%)	22 (11%)
Employee responsiveness	Social Presence	2 (3%)	3 (4%)	5 (8%)	10 (5%)
<b>Other Factors</b>		<b>8 (12%)</b>	<b>19 (29%)</b>	<b>16 (26%)</b>	<b>43 (22%)</b>
Organizational culture Norm of collaboration Focus on diversity Focus on development Focus on job security Support for working virtually Rewards and recognition	None	4 (6%)	11 (17%)	11 (18%)	26 (13%)
Nature of the work Flexible hours Work/life balance Challenging projects		4 (6%)	8 (12%)	5 (8%)	17 (9%)

$N = 66$

**Engagement factors.** Mean scores and standard deviations for the engagement factors items were calculated, where 1 = most important factor for engagement and 15 = least important factor for engagement (see Table 9). The top engagement factor reported

by participants was trust ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 3.03$ ), and the least important factor was accessibility of processes/procedures/policies ( $M = 12.77$ ,  $SD = 3.63$ ). Overall, transparent culture elements were ranked lower ( $M = 9.03$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) than other factors of engagement ( $M = 6.87$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). A paired samples  $t$ -test revealed that the difference in mean scores was significant:  $t(77) = 6.04$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 10).

**Table 9**

***Engagement Factor Rankings***

Factor	Mean	SD
Transparent Culture Elements		
Trust (leadership presence)	4.06	3.03
Regular interaction with manager (leadership presence)	8.03	3.57
Personal expression and open communication (open communication)	8.46	4.50
Accessibility of virtual technology platforms (e-presence)	8.92	4.39
Feedback (leadership presence)	9.21	3.34
Accessibility of management (leadership presence)	10.28	3.21
Senior leadership presence (leadership presence)	10.49	3.69
Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies (e-presence)	12.77	3.63
Overall	9.03	1.50
Other Factors		
Opportunities for growth	5.03	3.10
Teamwork and collaboration	5.49	3.52
Work/life balance	6.29	4.42
Challenging projects	6.49	3.52
Compensation	7.03	3.68
Rewards and recognition	8.38	3.86
Performance and accountability	9.41	4.00
Other <sup>1</sup>	15.67	2.09
Overall	6.87	1.66

$N = 78$

1 = Most important for engagement, 15 = Least important for engagement

<sup>1</sup>Two participants provided other factors. One factor was “love and passion for what you do” (Rank = 1) and another was “access to new technologies” (Rank = 5)

**Table 10**

***Comparison of Engagement Factor Rankings: Transparent Culture versus Other Factors***

Paired Differences					$t$	$df$	Sig.
Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
2.15	3.15	.36	1.44	2.86	6.04	77	.000***

\*\*\*significant at the .001 level

Engagement factor rankings were compared for men and women (see Table 11).

Men ranked two engagement factors significantly higher than women did: senior leadership presence (mean diff. = 2.11,  $p = .024$ ) and accessibility of management (mean diff. = 1.86,  $p = .014$ ). Senior leadership presence was ranked 11th by men and 14th for women. Accessibility of management was ranked 10th by men and 13th by women.

**Table 11**

***Engagement Factors by Gender***

Factor	Males N = 29		Females N = 47		t	df	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Transparent Culture Elements	8.86	1.69	9.20	1.36	-.96	74	.34
Senior leadership presence	9.17	4.14	11.28	3.25	-2.33	49.00	.024*
Accessibility of virtual technology platforms	8.34	4.32	9.51	4.37	-1.14	74	.260
Regular interaction with manager	7.72	3.75	8.21	3.56	-.57	74	.570
Trust	4.66	3.06	3.68	3.01	1.36	74	.177
Accessibility of management	9.10	3.42	10.96	2.93	-2.51	74	.014*
Feedback	9.28	3.60	9.13	3.17	.19	74	.851
Personal expression and open communication	9.76	4.60	7.89	4.27	1.80	74	.076
Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies	12.86	3.75	12.94	3.48	-.09	74	.930
Other Factors	7.14	1.79	6.63	1.56	1.32	74	.19
Opportunities for growth	4.59	2.97	5.06	3.01	-.68	74	.502
Challenging projects	6.69	3.60	6.53	3.48	.19	74	.850
Compensation	6.83	3.91	7.06	3.47	-.28	74	.784
Teamwork and collaboration	6.41	3.75	5.02	3.31	1.70	74	.094
Rewards and recognition	8.14	3.92	8.38	3.88	-.27	74	.790
Work/life balance	7.41	4.86	5.49	4.06	1.78	51.49	.080
Performance and accountability	9.93	4.18	8.85	3.77	1.16	74	.248
Other	15.10	3.40	16.00	0.00	-1.42	28.00	.166

N = 78 (two respondents did not identify their gender)

\*significant at the .05 level

1 = Most important for engagement, 15 = Least important for engagement

Engagement factor rankings also were compared by age group (see Table 12).

Two factors revealed significant differences: opportunities for growth  $F(3,74) = 6.108$ ,  $p = .001$  and accessibility of processes/procedures/policies  $F(3,74) = 3.254$ ,  $p = .026$ .

Additional analysis was needed to determine the exact nature of the differences.

**Table 12*****Analysis of Variance for Engagement Factors by Age***

		<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Opportunities for Growth	Between Groups	147.255	3	49.085	6.108	.001***
	Within Groups	594.694	74	8.036		
	Total	741.949	77			
Accessibility of processes/ procedures/policies	Between Groups	117.930	3	39.310	3.254	.026*
	Within Groups	893.916	74	12.080		
	Total	1011.846	77			

*N* = 78

\*significant at the .05 level; \*\*\*significant at the .001 level

1 = Most important for engagement, 15 = Least important for engagement

Table 13 reports the descriptive statistics by age group, and Table 14 reports the results of Scheffe's post hoc test, which was performed to determine the specific differences in scores. Compared to 50-59 year olds, 20-29 year olds gave significantly higher ratings to opportunities for growth (mean diff. = 5.083, 95% *C.I.* .77, 9.40,  $p = .014$ ) and significantly lower ratings to accessibility of processes/procedures/ policies (mean diff. = -5.667, 95% *C.I.* -10.96, -.37,  $p = .031$ ). Similarly, compared to 50-59 year olds, 30-39 year olds gave significantly higher ratings to opportunities for growth (mean diff. = 4.970, 95% *C.I.* .60, 9.34,  $p = .019$ ) and significantly lower ratings to accessibility of processes/procedures/policies (mean diff. = -5.540, 95% *C.I.* -10.89, -.19,  $p = .040$ ).

**Table 13*****Select Engagement Factor Descriptive Statistics by Age***

<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Opportunities for Growth Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Accessibility of Processes/ Procedures/Policies Mean (SD)</b>
20-29	30	4.17 (2.98)	13.17 (3.29)
30-39	25	4.28 (2.59)	13.04 (3.31)
40-49	19	6.47 (2.57)	12.89 (3.56)
50-59	4	9.25 (4.35)	7.50 (5.45)

*N* = 78

1 = Most important for engagement, 15 = Least important for engagement

Table 14

*Scheffe's Post-Hoc Test for Engagement Factors by Age*

Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Opportunities for Growth	50-59	20-29	5.083	1.509	.014*	.77	9.40
		30-39	4.970	1.527	.019*	.60	9.34
		40-49	2.776	1.560	.373	-1.69	7.24
Accessibility of Processes/ Procedures/Policies	50-59	20-29	-5.667	1.850	.031*	-10.96	-.37
		30-39	-5.540	1.872	.040*	-10.89	-.19
		40-49	-5.395	1.912	.055	-10.86	.08

N = 78

\*Significant at the .05 level

Finally, participants were asked to provide any open-ended comments they believed relevant regarding the study. A total of 14 respondents provided answers. Analysis revealed three themes (see Table 15).

Table 15

*Open-Ended Survey Comments*

Comment	N (%)
Virtual work can promote better work/life balance, productivity, happiness	5 (36%)
Successful virtual work requires supportive tools and culture	5 (36%)
Not suitable for all situations or people	4 (28%)

N = 14

Five respondents (36%) reported that virtual work can promote better work/life balance, productivity, and happiness for employees. One respondent shared, "I LOVE being able to save time from not having to commute and work from home." Another commented, "I average 3 days per week working from home and 2 in the office. I get more done working from home, as I do not have the hour commute each way and can use that time for emails, calls, etc." Another five respondents indicated that successful virtual work requires supportive tools and culture. One respondent shared,

Virtual work is possible, even inevitable, but it takes an organizational effort (to include proper technology investments). To think that virtual workers are somehow privileged and, therefore, the burden of virtual integration falls on their

shoulders is misguided and a symptom of senior leadership falling behind the talent management curve.

Another respondent noted,

Trusting that people will do the job they are supposed to do. I think giving us the tools, and enabling the workforce to be able to work collaboratively, is a big thing. There is no way you can be successful in a virtual team environment if you don't have the physical tools, as well as the software tools, to enable you. You have to drive the acceptance of working remotely from the top down.

Finally, four respondents (28%) emphasized that virtual work is not suitable for all situations or people. One respondent commented that personal preferences play a role:

Working remotely is not for everyone. Some people are really good at it, while others who are social hate it. I personally don't like it. I would rather go to work and interact with people. But, on the other hand, when one is busy and needs to focus, it can be magical in productivity.

Another shared that professional development and career advancement goals may not be conducive to working virtually:

Working virtual has been enabled by my company with proper tools and protocol. I have been very successful, promoted, rewarded, recognized, all while working remote. However, I don't plan on working remote for the long term. I find it is challenging to stay top-of-mind with leadership to gain access to ongoing promotions and growth opportunities.

## Interview Findings

Interview data were gathered to assess the organization's cultural transparency and to gather participant views of factors needed to produce open virtual cultures, factors needed to foster employee engagement, and leaders' roles in creating transparent virtual cultures. The findings are reported in the following sections.

**Cultural transparency.** Analysis of participant responses revealed four themes regarding their organization's level of cultural transparency (see Table 16). Ten participants reported that they consult written documentation or online forums to find resources and answers in their daily work. One participant shared, "The first place I look

for information is in our internal database for an answer first. We have an internal database that is for our Snappy organization.” Another participant shared that after several times of asking people for help and being directed to the web, she has learned to go there first. She explained:

I’m going on 15 years here. I could always ask people, “Where do you find this? Where do you find that?” And I always got the same answer, “From the web, it’s on the web.” After hearing that for a little while or two, it’s sort of like, “You just go to the web.”

Nine participants reported they ask other employees for the answers they need—often because the knowledge they need is tacit and undocumented or because the tools available are difficult to search. One participant shared,

If I’m really curious about something, I have a group of people that I can ask, and so I usually go to them personally. I like to talk to them in person, so I feel like a lot of the information in the team comes from tribal knowledge. You can only read so many process documents, because a lot of the work here is relationship-based. Some of it is operational and tactical, but a lot of it is, “How does this person work, or how does this process go?”

Another participant explained:

Most of the time, I look for the person [who knows about the topic I need] and then they’ll either send me something that’s on our intranet . . . [or] we’ll have a call and go, “Hey, so how do you do this?” or “How should I get involved with this?” or “How do I do this, get this data uploaded into this specific ban?” That would be a process question where it hasn’t been documented and they have to walk me through it.

**Table 16**

***Methods for Retrieving Task-Related Information***

<b>Method</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Consult written documentation or online forums	10
Ask other employees	9
Use tool customized for our department	2
Hold meetings to share best practices	1

*N* = 15



Participants also shared two key problems they have noted with the tools they have in the organization (see Table 17). Eight participants noted that the organization has a great deal of knowledge, but it is not being documented, updated, and pruned as needed. One participant shared, “Our internal site, we have so much information there. Some of the stuff is old information that needs to be deleted. We have it available, but the problem is, people are not contributing to it.” Another explained,

A lot of knowledge or a good amount of the key specific knowledge is within the team. Not many document it. A lot of the knowledge I have is usually from word of mouth and is team-specific. There are some documentations, but they’re usually very convoluted, non-existent, or hard to find.

**Table 17**

*Issues with Transparency Tools*

<b>Issue</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Have ample knowledge, but it is not being documented, updated, and pruned as needed	8
Have many technologies but some problems with them	5

*N* = 15

Additionally, although the organization has made a number of virtual communication technologies available, five participants noted problems with them, such as ineffective search functionality or simply having too many tools to use. One participant noted,

The search tools are kind of frustrating to use. I might ask somebody what spec do I use for this? That is probably something I can look up if I knew the exact thing I needed to search. It’s easier to talk to people about most things instead of having to look it up.

Another shared,

We have tons of mailers. The downside of that is we have too much. There’s no central mailer for receiving information for what’s going on in each specific campus. Typically, there’s five different mailers that people have to subscribe to. Each one you subscribe to gives you information about a specific event.

Another participant shared there are multiple tools used, due to multiple teams working together from a cross-textual, cross-functional perspective:

We are not monolithic, in the sense that we have one culture or one set of tools that we all use. I think every different team uses a different type of tool, web knowledge, and so forth. It is a matrix organization, [and] you've got a lot of different teams working with a lot of others from a cross-textual, cross-functional perspective. We do have a common set of tools that we all use.

**Factors producing open virtual cultures.** Participants were asked to comment on the survey results and identify the factors producing open virtual cultures. The participants commented that both transparency culture elements and other factors helped create this kind of environment (see Table 18).

Ten participants stated that a key factor was e-presence, which meant having remote access and virtual tools and technology that gave them real-time access to others. One participant shared, “if you give someone all the information in the world but it’s . . . not given in a way that it can be accessed, then it would be more difficult to . . . do my job.” Another shared the importance of “always having that open line to the rest of your team, whether it be in a text message or an email that gets responded to, any type of communication that can be responded to in real time.” Eight participants stressed that leadership presence was important, in terms of having a leader they trust who communicates openly and is accessible. Six added that open communication is important, which one participant described as “giving them information as quickly as you have it.”

Other factors also were cited by participants, included respect ( $n = 4$ ) and flexible work hours ( $n = 4$ ). One participant shared,

I think flexible hours is becoming a little more important now, especially in an open environment of a virtual environment because it’s really important to have that flexibility to be able to say, hey I can work 4 hours, but then I’m going to need at least to skip this because I have something or sometimes I have to pick up the kids or something like that.

Table 18

*Factors Promoting Open Virtual Cultures*

<b>Transparency Culture Elements</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
E-Presence	10
Leadership Presence	8
Open Communication	6
Social Presence	2
Knowledge Presence	1
Other Factors	
Respect	4
Flexible Work Hours	4
Clear, Common Goals	3
Growth and Opportunities	2
Accountability	2

*N* = 15

Participants also offered a number of suggestions for how to create an open virtual environment, including building e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence, although only a few suggestions were cited by several participants (see Table 19). For example, six participants expressed that building e-presence required being engaged and accessible. One participant shared, “I find that it doesn’t matter what kind of tools you have, or what kind of new gadgets or gizmos that’s going to help you get connected. If there’s no one on the other end, what’s the point?” Another expressed, “I also make sure I’m readily available [and I] make sure my status is actually accurate if I’m away from my laptop.” Another participant noted how each transparency factor fit into one of two categories, likability or reliability, which enhanced trust in the organization:

I think the concept of trust is a big thing. That being likability plus reliability equals trust. From a reliability perspective, you want to make sure that you’ve got the knowledge. Leadership, as well, by having reliable leadership. From a likability perspective, there is a social presence aspect of it, being perceived a real person and having those interpersonal relationships. All of those being enabled through technology and having tools that you can basically use for that [purpose].

Another shared,

That's where you need to set the rules ahead of time for something like this. We either ask person X for this type of information and . . . [this person can] be the gold source of knowledge, on the latest and greatest, or we all agree that we use [a] document repository or blog post or whatever source of tool you use internally, to be the latest on that information.

**Table 19**

*Methods for Creating an Open Virtual Environment*

<b>Method</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Building e-Presence	
Be engaged and accessible	6
Consistently use the tools	3
Building Social Presence	
Seek in-person experiences or use video	4
Engage in mutual personal conversation	3
Be transparent about in-/out-of-office status	1
Schedule periodic onsite meetings	1
Building Knowledge Presence	
Make knowledge-sharing tools available	2
Give incentives for employees sharing information	1
Assuring Alignment	
Employees and leaders need to work effectively with others across time zones and cultures	6
Organizational norms need to support working virtually	3
Hire only those who want to and are efficient working remotely	2

*N* = 15

Participants also emphasized the importance of assuring organizational and individual alignment with a virtual environment. Six participants, for example, pointed out the need for employees and leaders to work effectively with others across time zones and cultures. One participant shared his experience: “The only problem seen was the time difference issue. . . . It either had to be really early in the morning or really late in the night.” Another shared,

I had to engage with people, employees, from another country in a totally opposite time zone, so communicating with them and then getting used to the so many different cultures, different languages, different accents, it's really tough to understand a lot of what's going on . . . [Also,] when you are communicating through email on two different time zones, it's kind of hard to get stuff done. . . .

If I sent an email right now, it's 4 a.m. there, I may get an email when they get into the office at 9:00 a.m., 10 a.m. their time, but it's at 10 p.m. my time. You plan ahead and find workarounds.

**Engagement factors.** Participants were asked to discuss the survey results and identify the factors that most enhance employee engagement (see Table 20). Four of the five transparency culture elements were identified, including social presence ( $n = 10$ ), knowledge presence and e-presence (each mentioned by eight participants), as well as leadership presence ( $n = 6$ ). Other factors also were cited, such as opportunities for growth, work/life balance, and rewards and recognition (each mentioned by six participants), and compensation ( $n = 5$ ) and teamwork and collaboration ( $n = 5$ ).

**Table 20**

*Engagement Factors*

Factor	Number of Participants	Number of Comments
Cultural Transparency Elements	15	32
Social Presence	10	
Knowledge Presence	8	
e-Presence	8	
Leadership Presence	6	
Other Factors	14	36
Opportunities for Growth	6	
Work/Life Balance	6	
Rewards and Recognition	6	
Compensation	5	
Teamwork and Collaboration	5	
Challenging Work and Projects	3	
Accessibility of Information, Policies, Processes	3	
Performance and Accountability	2	

$N = 15$

When asked to explain their answers, participants offered several explanations for the engagement factors they identified (see Table 21). Eleven of the 15 participants emphasized that the ability to trust leaders is critical. One participant explained,

If you can't trust your boss, your team, the company, what you're doing day to day, then what's really going to motivate you and what's really going to keep you wanting to stay here and working and succeeding, and wanting to see others succeed? I think trust is definitely number one.

Another expressed,

Employees do not really know what's going on politically. You kind of get caught up into restructuring or reorganizations. You still like the company, but you feel like your manager is telling you one thing, and it comes down to another thing. I see a lot of trust issues. I think trust is related to the relationship with your manager.

Six participants reported the importance for leaders to be accessible real time when needed. For example, one participant explained,

You reach out to your manager when you need him [or her] and you usually have your touch base time. . . . As long as I can contact him when I need him, it's not like I need him 24 hours a day. I know if I need to email him, or have a quick discussion, I can.

In terms of the importance of e-presence, six participants shared that the virtual communication tools enable flexible work hours and arrangements. One participant pointed out,

It's because of the virtual technology platform that allows people to work from home. For instance, the virtual private network that allows us to, as long as you have Internet connection, you could work anywhere. You could be in Hawaii and work from home or would take your calls.

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of deepest engagement while working remotely (see Table 22). Fifteen participants described a number of experiences, although only a few common themes were mentioned by several participants. Four interviewees shared stories of feeling connected to others. One participant shared,

It was interesting how we had fun as a team together but weren't actually physically together. They took my badge picture and put it on popsicle sticks to remind themselves that I was actually there and should be looping me in on things. So they brought that into the call, and it was really funny.

**Table 21**  
*Importance of Engagement Factors*

<b>Explanation</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Importance of Leadership Presence	
Ability to trust leadership is critical	11
Leaders need to be accessible real time	6
Constructive criticism aids professional development and enhances quality of work	3
Importance of e-Presence	
Enables flexible work hours and arrangements	6
Enables other engagement factors to emerge	5
Enhances accessibility to peers	5
Simulates in-person communication	1
Importance of Social Presence	
Promotes free sharing of information	4
Fosters deeper connection to coworkers and organization	4
Builds authenticity and trust	2
Importance of Open Communication	
Facilitates trust and authenticity	4
Facilitates efficient and effective project work	2
Importance of Knowledge Presence	
Not important when employees know whom to consult	3
Enables quick retrieval of answers	2
Not valuable when search tools do not work well	1
Importance of Work/Life Balance: Allows for my own schedule and self-care	3
Importance of Teamwork and Collaboration: Increases sense of connection to work	1
Accessibility of Policies and Procedures: Unimportant for daily work	1
All are important	1

*N* = 15

**Table 22**  
*Experiences of Deepest Engagement*

<b>Experience</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Feeling connected to others	4
Attaining efficiency and effectiveness using virtual communication tools	4
Working on a challenging project of interest	3
Minimizing distractions	2
Being responded to quickly	1
Being allowed to work remotely	1

*N* = 15

Attaining efficiency and effectiveness using virtual communication tools also was described as a key experience of engagement by four participants. One participant explained,

That I can connect with them, but not necessarily sitting right by them, is amazing to me. You know it's real time. We have the technology to do this, so life is easier. You don't have to sit right outside the door of your manager; you can have them remotely and still connect and see their face. I use instant messaging a lot with my manager, that or email. I speak through my computer if I need to, or we just instant message, type it out basically, or email.

Another participant commented on using a number of virtual communication tools on a daily basis and reiterated communication as a key driver of engagement through the use of these tools. The participant noted,

The key here is communication, communication, communication. Meaning, from a virtual team perspective, you could easily slip into your own silo and be very focused and not plugged into your team. What we try to do is daily communication, whether it is a combination of instant messaging, like using Jabber, or our daily calls. People can stay plugged into what's going on, both socially and professionally. Even from a social perspective, someone [may] find an article that's funny or interesting [to share].

**Leaders' roles in creating transparent cultures.** Finally, participants were asked in more detail about their experiences with leaders and about senior leadership presence to ascertain the roles that leaders need to take in creating transparent virtual cultures (see Table 23). Eight participants expressed that senior leaders need to be human and accessible to subordinates. One participant elaborated,

I feel like that holds a lot of ground knowing that the senior leadership team are present, they are out there, they are talking. They do make the effort. They're not in a big executive office behind closed doors. You do hear from them. . . . [At my former employer] I would see . . . [the chief executive officer] all the time. It's really neat. It's like, here's this guy, this super influential person in this field. Just walking around, wherever, talking to our interns, talking to our new hires.

Another shared,

As a leader, you are obviously making sure whatever needs to be done gets done, but at the same time you need to be able to make sure that you're not being



robotic, you're there as a human. . . . They already come off in a way as kind of the celebrities of the company. We're still human at the end of the day, and you can talk to me if you need to talk to me.

**Table 23**

*Leaders' Roles in Transparent Virtual Culture*

<b>Role</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Be human and accessible to subordinates	8
Personally connect with and develop trust with employees	7
Communicate high-level direction transparently and regularly	6
Get to know your subordinates	3
Inspire achievement	2
Assure that communication with subordinates does not break down	2
No response: I don't interact with senior leaders	3

*N* = 15

Seven participants expressed that leaders need to personally connect with and develop trust with employees. One participant shared,

I think it's important that even if you're a manager, you get to know your staff in person at some point. . . . [My manager] comes in two to three times a year and we always make a point to see him. Even though we work remotely, it's important to put some face time to your job.

Another shared,

There was one time when I was on a video call with a manager and her housemaid was in the back cleaning the house. That was cool 'cause you could really see who she is and you really got a good sense of what was going on over there.

Six participants believed it was important for leaders to communicate the organization's high-level direction transparently and regularly. One interviewee emphasized,

Your senior leadership is aware, they're being transparent. You also need to walk the talk. I see leaders where they would say one thing, but they don't do the other. I think if leaders want employees to be transparent, they need to be transparent themselves. . . . You need to have a consistent communication to your employees. . . . When employees are unsure where we are going, you get confused, you become disengaged, you start thinking elsewhere, focusing [on] other things.

## Summary of Findings

This chapter described the survey and interview results which intended to answer the four research questions created for this study. The survey findings suggested that participants generally agreed that cultural transparency existed in their organization, although they were somewhat neutral about the degree and transparency of leadership. While participants neither agreed nor disagreed about the existence of leadership presence in the survey findings, they generally agreed that leadership presence was important.

Interview data identified that a culture of transparency can exist only if trust emanates from the top of the hierarchy. A culture of trust must be sustainable by leadership for a culture of transparency to exist. A culture of transparency can exist only when leadership institutionalizes a reward system for employees and teams whose behaviors characterize the desired state of transparency. When leaders role model and enforce transparent behaviors, employees are more willing to be transparent and open with communication while being held accountable for exhibiting behaviors of transparency.

When transparent elements were compared between genders, women (no age variance) believed there was more transparency in the workplace than did men when it came to accessibility of communication tools and technology, leadership authenticity, and interpersonal relationships. Interview responses indicated that participants regularly consulted written documentation or online forums and contacted others in the company for needed information. However, participants also noted problems with incomplete or outdated documentation and having too many virtual communication technologies to manage. Interview responses also indicated that employees prefer having real-time

accessibility to their managers when needed—such as through instant messaging, Skype, WebEx, or video conferencing. When a remote employee is aware of a manager's presence and accessibility, it is less necessary for a manager to frequently reach out and contact the employee. Having a social presence alone increases remote employee engagement, not frequency of contact.

Transparent culture elements such as accessibility to adequate communication tools and technology, social presence/connectiveness, accountability, open communication, and trust were strongly endorsed in both the survey and interview data as contributing to an open and transparent virtual work environment. Other factors believed to contribute to this type of environment include organizational culture; the nature of the work; respect; flexible work hours; clear, common goals; growth and opportunities; and accountability.

Although transparent culture elements were strongly endorsed as contributing to engagement, these factors ranked lower than other factors as contributors of engagement on the survey. The highest endorsed factor was trust, which can be supported and maintained with reliable and likeable transparent culture elements. Other strongly endorsed engagement factors included opportunities for growth, teamwork and collaboration, work/life balance, and challenging projects. Interview findings revealed that all 15 participants endorsed transparent culture elements as engagement factors, and 14 participants endorsed the other factors.

Participants identified several ways that leaders can contribute to an open and engaging, transparent, virtual environment. These included being human and accessible to subordinates; personally connecting with and developing trust with employees; pre-scheduled meetings rather than unscheduled, short, frequent informal meetings; and

communicating the organization's high-level direction transparently and regularly, among others. The next chapter provides a discussion of these results in relation to the literature, reviews key findings, draws conclusions, identifies limitations of the study, as well offers recommendations for practitioners and suggestions for continued research.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in the workplace where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted within one high-technology organization. Four research questions were examined:

1. What degree of cultural transparency exists within the organization?
2. What factors produce an open virtual culture within the organization?
3. What factors promote employee engagement within the organization?
4. What role do leaders play in creating an engaging, transparent virtual work environment?

Key findings and conclusions are presented below, followed by a discussion of the study limitations, recommendations for practitioners, and suggestions for continued research.

### Key Findings

This study discovered key findings in the areas of cultural transparency, factors that promote open virtual culture, engagement factors, and leaders' roles in creating transparent cultures. These findings are detailed in the following sections.

**Degree of cultural transparency.** Survey findings indicated that the organization rather strongly exhibits a culture of transparency. For example, the organization invests heavily in technology capital, which allows employees to socially connect real time, while having access to a variety of virtual tools. The survey data were less favorable about the transparency of leadership. Interviewees elaborated that cultural transparency is supported when leaders trust their employees and are trustworthy themselves.

These findings support Bennis et al.'s (2008) assertion that organizations are increasingly creating and promoting cultures of transparency. Sheridan (2012b) elaborated that these cultures more easily form in organizations where employees have access to communication tools—specifically, the ability to create private social platforms with, between, and among employees.

Some gender differences were found regarding participant evaluations of the organization's transparency. Women of all ages believed there was more transparency in the workplace than did men when it came to accessibility of communication tools and technology, leadership authenticity, and interpersonal relationships. The review of the literature for this study did not reveal gender differences relating to cultural transparency factors; therefore, additional research would be needed to determine the cause of these differences.

**Factors that promote open virtual culture.** Transparent culture elements were strongly endorsed in the survey and interview data as contributing to an open and transparent virtual work environment. Of these, the most commonly cited factors were adequate communication tools and technology (e-presence) and leadership (leadership presence). With regard to leadership, participants noted that trust, openness and honesty, and having real-time accessibility to managers using communication tools and technology were particularly important. In the interviews, participants elaborated that open and virtual cultures are supported when leaders give clear direction, goals, and objectives, while being flexible and accessible when needed. Other factors believed to contribute to this type of environment include organizational culture; the nature of the work; respect; flexible work hours; clear, common goals; growth and opportunities; and accountability.

The present study's findings are consistent with past literature on the importance of technology for creating open and transparent virtual work environments (Clemons & Kroth, 2011; Holtz & Havens, 2009). Clemons and Kroth (2011) emphasized that employees need to have a variety of tools available to them so they may use what they prefer. Other authors noted that the way leaders and employees use technology affects the sense of trust in the organization and that trust is foundational for performance in a virtual setting (Cascio, 2000; McGrath & Hollingshead, 1993). Specific to organizational culture and behavioral norms, Holtz and Havens (2009) explained that transparency is built and manifested in action, meaning how employees are responding to each other and dealing with immediate input.

Some discrepancies also were evident when comparing the present findings to past literature. When determining the level of engagement of remote employees with leadership, some sources (Bell, 2013; Kolbenschlag, 2014; Kurtzberg, 2014) stressed the importance of frequent contact between leaders and remote employees with the use of virtual tools. In addition, researchers Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) found that frequent online communication with remote employees increased trust.

In the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Mulki, Bardhi, Lask, and Nanavaty-Dahl (2009) reported that employees feel less isolated when managers conduct frequent, informal, one-to-one or team meetings with the use of instant messaging, teleconference, WebEx, and telephone. A remote worker is less self-conscious when frequent, informal discussions allow for give-and-take. During this study, participants interviewed generally disagreed with these findings. Participants believed that managers who heavily rely on informal and frequent contact with remote employees may inadvertently create a disengaged and less open workforce. Participants believed they had less flexibility and

were being monitored, due to a lack of trust by management. The findings suggest that employees prefer having real-time accessibility to their managers when needed—such as through instant messaging, Skype, WebEx, or video conferencing. When a remote employee is aware of a manager’s presence and accessibility, it is not necessary for a manager to frequently reach out and contact the employee. Having a social presence alone increases remote employee engagement, not frequency of contact. These collected findings suggest that managers need to preschedule check-ins with remote employees, rather than have frequent, informal check-ins. Sheridan (2012b) generally agreed with this finding by noting that a virtual manager should schedule status updates ahead of time to stay abreast of an employee’s progress rather than disturbing a remote employee unnecessarily.

**Engagement factors.** Participants identified a range of factors that contribute to engagement, including transparent culture elements and other factors, such as opportunities for growth, teamwork and collaboration, work/life balance, and challenging projects. Men ranked two engagement factors significantly higher than women did: senior leadership presence and accessibility of management. Younger employees more strongly endorsed opportunities for growth.

These findings suggest that the degree of employee engagement is associated with the level of openness and transparency when operating in a virtual work environment. Moreover, reflection on these findings suggests that trust between and among employees and leaders is critically important and may provide a foundation for many of the other factors. At the same time, having an open and transparent virtual environment is not necessarily sufficient for engagement. Instead, more traditional engagement factors



remain salient, as employees continue to care about their growth and development, ability to balance personal and professional lives, and ability to work well with others.

These findings suggest that the task of engaging virtual employees requires more careful attention and design than in traditional workforces, because the virtual environment requires certain characteristics, such as trust, openness, respect, and real-time accessibility, to function effectively. In other words, organizations may first need to create and embrace a culture of trust and openness before remote employees become fully engaged in a virtual work environment. A culture of trust can be supported and maintained with reliable and likeable transparent factors, such as access to preferred and reliable virtual communication tools, which enable employees to build a strong social presence through interpersonal relationships with their colleagues at a far distance.

**Leaders' roles in creating transparent cultures.** Participants identified several ways that leaders can contribute to an open and engaging, transparent virtual environment. These included being human and accessible to subordinates, personally connecting and developing trust with employees, and communicating the organization's high-level direction transparently and regularly, among others. These findings emphasize the need for leaders to act as role models demonstrating honesty, respect, trust, collaboration, and openness. Leaders who are genuine, authentic, and approachable help to promote an environment of openness. Moreover, participants stressed that managers remain accessible real time through a variety of communication means.

The study findings are consistent with several past studies regarding the importance of the influence on organizational culture and climate by organizational leaders (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1993; Sheridan, 2012b). Clemons and Kroth (2011)

added that leaders convey trust, self-disclosure, and cultural savvy when they create a sustainable social presence with their employees.

## Conclusions

The findings of the present study led to five key conclusions:

1. Trust is foundational to fostering transparency and engaging employees in virtual work environments. This occurs because trust is the common denominator underlying open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence.
2. A culture of transparency exists within an organization when virtual tools are available to support the creation and maintenance of trust, accountability, and communication among and between leaders and employees.
3. Open and transparent virtual cultures are made possible when the organization exhibits e-presence and knowledge presence and supports norms of open communication, leadership presence, and social presence. Open virtual cultures also are fostered when leaders provide clear direction; give employees respect, growth opportunities, and flexible work hours; and hold employees accountable for participating effectively in the virtual environment.
4. Engaging virtual employees requires careful design of the environment so that it reflects open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence. Additionally, leaders must assure that traditional engagement factors of growth and development, work/life balance, and collaboration also are in place.
5. Leaders play a crucial role in creating transparent culture, because they set the tone for the degree and nature of trust in the organization. They establish goals

and enforce accountability surrounding the practice of open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence in virtual environments.

### **Limitations**

Four limitations affected the present study:

1. **Survey Structure:** Several problems with the questionnaire instrument need to be acknowledged. First, the instrument did not measure the presence or impact of cultural transparency elements to an equal extent. For example, in the section that assessed cultural transparency, 15 items measured open communication, whereas only three items measured social presence. In the section that measured engagement factors, knowledge presence and social presence were not measured at all, whereas five items measured the impact of leadership presence on engagement. Future studies should strive to measure each factor with the same number of items. Confusion also appeared to exist concerning the item “Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies.” Future research should define each factor to assure that participants understand the items. The engagement section of the questionnaire also required participants to force rank a list of 15 items in terms of their impact on engagement. This may have biased the data because participants may not think that any of these items affect their engagement. It would have been better to present the 15 factors as individual items, where participants indicate their agreement with “\_\_\_\_\_ makes me feel alive and engaged while at work,” and answer choices range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Post hoc testing revealed that two of the scales that measured cultural transparency had

insufficient reliability. Moreover, no validation testing of the instrument was performed. Future research should utilize a reliable and validated instrument.

2. **Terminology:** Operationalization of the terms was not clearly defined (e.g., leadership presence) and thus need to be clarified in similar future studies.
3. **Sample Size:** The study findings are based on one organization that drew upon a small sample from within that company. Therefore, the findings should be considered exploratory and not representative of all employees within that organization nor of all virtual employees in general. For example, although the study participants preferred an accessible, rather than a highly attentive manager, other employees may actually prefer a manager who engages with them each day or several times a week. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the present findings to other employees or settings.
4. **Downsizing History:** The study organization had undergone recent restructuring, which involved multiple reductions in force over the 3 years leading up to this study. These significant organizational events are highly distressing for employees and can substantially disrupt their sense of trust and perceptions of leadership. It follows that the findings regarding trust and leadership presence may be more reflective of the organization's recent history rather than of the preferences and needs of virtual employees at all times.

### **Recommendations**

Four recommendations are offered for leaders of virtual workforces and organization development consultants who may support, guide, or collaborate with leaders in carrying out these activities:

1. Leaders are encouraged to evaluate the level of trust in their organizations and consider what interventions may be appropriate for enhancing trust. This is important because of the criticality of trust needed to foster transparency and engage employees in virtual work environments. Interventions may include one-on-one communication or other approaches to clarify direction, gather feedback, and respond to questions.
2. Leaders are advised to examine the existence and effectiveness of elements such as open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence that were found to be essential to creating a culture of transparency and then take necessary actions to assure that adequate tools are accessible for employees to use. Possible actions include selecting and implementing new tools, phasing out insufficient or unused tools, and providing employee training and incentives to encourage their use. Although it is important to offer a range of tools, participants noted that having too many tools can be deleterious and overwhelming.
3. Given the fundamental role leaders play in creating transparent cultures, it is essential that current and aspiring managers are adequately trained to carry out this demanding role. In addition to exhibiting traditional leadership behaviors such as providing direction, developing employees, and promoting climates of trust and respect, virtual leaders also need to establish goals and enforce accountability surrounding the practice of open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence in virtual environments.

4. Although the present study offers sound insights and guidelines for promoting an open and engaging virtual environment, managers must take care to customize their approaches to the specific employees they are managing. For example, managers can engage employees by first asking them how they would like to be engaged and what is important to them and then customizing the frequency and nature of their interactions accordingly.

### **Suggestions for Research**

Five suggestions for future research are offered based on the results of this study:

1. Trust: Identify and include only organizations with a sustainable culture of trust when evaluating if cultural transparency impacts employee engagement. Will transparent factor rankings change when there is already a sustainable culture of trust? Will transparent factors rank higher for employee engagement than other factors when there is already a sustainable culture of trust?
2. Gender: Some gender differences were found regarding participant evaluations of the organization's transparency. Women of all ages believed there was more transparency in the workplace than did men when it came to accessibility of communication tools and technology, leadership authenticity, and interpersonal relationships. Additional research would be needed to determine the cause of these differences.
3. Generational: Some age differences were found regarding participant evaluations of the organization's transparency. Millennials gave significantly lower ratings to accessibility of processes/procedures/policies, while Baby Boomers gave significantly higher ratings to accessibility of

processes/procedures/policies. Additional research would be needed to determine the cause of these differences.

4. Leadership: Given the fundamental role leaders play in creating transparent cultures, should organizations with transparent cultures hire only leaders who value transparency, hire and train new leaders with little or no transparency, or both? Additional research would be needed to determine if leaders can be trained for transparency.
5. Real-time Accessibility: Is the need for real-time accessibility to management industry, culturally, regionally, or generationally driven in a virtual work environment? Additional research would be needed to determine if real-time accessibility is driven by industry, culture, region, or generational differences.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural transparency and engagement in workplaces where a majority of employees work virtually. The study was conducted with Cisco Systems located in Silicon Valley, California. Data regarding the organization's cultural transparency and the factors that create open virtual environments and employee engagement were gathered using survey and interview procedures. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics as well as content analysis. Interview data were examined using content analysis.

Trust was revealed to be foundational to fostering transparency and engaging employees in virtual work environments. This occurs because trust is the common denominator underlying open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence. Study findings indicated that cultural transparency exists within an organization when virtual tools are available to support the creation and

maintenance of trust, accountability, and communication among and between leaders and employees.

Engaging virtual employees requires careful design of the environment so that it reflects open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence. Additionally, leaders must assure that traditional engagement factors of growth and development, work/life balance, and collaboration also are in place. It follows that leaders play a crucial role in creating transparent cultures, as they set the tone for the degree and nature of trust in the organization and establish goals and enforce accountability surrounding the practice of open communication, leadership presence, e-presence, social presence, and knowledge presence in virtual environments.

These findings indicate that leaders play a fundamental role in creating transparent cultures, and it is essential that current and aspiring managers are adequately trained to carry out this responsibility. Once in the role, leaders are encouraged to evaluate the level of trust in their organizations and consider what interventions may be appropriate for enhancing trust. Leaders additionally are advised to examine the presence and effectiveness of the various cultural transparency elements in their organization and take necessary actions to assure that adequate tools are in place and that employees are using them.

Finally, managers are advised to customize their approaches to the specific employees they are managing. Given organizations' increasing and rapid movement toward virtual workplaces, it is critical to continue building knowledge and taking action to promote open and engaging virtual workplaces.



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## Appendix A: Study Invitation

## Appendix A: Study Invitation

As organizations diversify and distribute remotely, so do the belief systems, values, and eventually the behaviors of their employees. The purpose of this study is to determine if a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual work environment in the IT industry. It is hoped that this information will be useful in assisting high-tech companies to increase employee engagement in a virtual work environment.

My name is Jason Kujanen, and I am a graduate student of Pepperdine University, Graziadio School of Business and Management, and this research is being conducted as part of my Master of Science in Organization Development. Should you have any questions about it or this process, you may contact my supervisor, Professor Miriam Lacey, Ph.D. at [contact information].

Your organization, Cisco, has voluntarily agreed to participate in my study. Over the next two weeks, employees will have an opportunity to participate in an online questionnaire, which will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Employees will also have the option to participate in a phone interview, which will take approximately 45 minutes.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Whether you participate or not does not affect your standing at your company or mine as a student. Should you decide not to participate, you are under no obligation to do so and can withdraw without penalty at any time. I am contacting you to request your participation. If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out the survey at: <http://pepperdine.qualtrics.com>.

I greatly appreciate your time and interest.

Sincerely,

Jason D. Kujanen  
Master of Organization Development Student  
Graziadio School of Business and Management  
Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA  
[contact information]



**Appendix B: Interview Consent Form**

## **Appendix B: Interview Consent Form**

**TITLE OF THE STUDY:** Cultural Transparency in a Virtual Work Environment

Please understand your participation in the study is strictly voluntary. The following is a description of what your participation entails, the terms for participating, and a discussion of your rights as a study participant. Please read this information carefully before deciding whether or not you wish to participate.

**RESEARCHER'S NAME & AFFILIATION:** Jason D. Kujanen, Graduate Student at the Graziadio School of Business and Management, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to determine if a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual work environment in the IT industry. While there may be a culture of transparency with external key stakeholders and the public, this study will only explore the free flow of non-confidential information internally from employee to employee, employees to leadership, and leadership to employees within one high-tech company in Silicon Valley.

**PROCEDURES:** If you decide to volunteer to participate in an interview, you will be asked to share your perceptions of working as a virtual employee for about 45 minutes and to discuss the findings of the survey. The researcher will take notes, which will be stored in a secure place during the research and then destroyed.

If you should decide to participate and find you are not interested in completing the interview, you have the right to discontinue at any point without being questioned about your decision. You also do not have to answer any of the questions that you prefer not to answer. Terminating your participation at any time will not affect you professionally in any way.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is completely voluntary. Whether you participate or not does not affect your standing at your company or mine as a student. Should you decide not to participate, you are under no obligation to do so and can withdraw without penalty at any time.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. You may, however, enjoy this opportunity to shed light on the world of virtual employment. There are no major risks associated with this study. The data will be kept in a secure manner for six (6) years, at which time the data will be destroyed.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The results learned from the interviews may be published in the form of articles, a book, or a research report; however, you will not be identified by name. Only the researcher will have direct access to the data. The confidentiality of individual records will be protected during and after the study, and anonymity will be preserved in the publication of the results. No names will be used to identify anyone who takes part. No comments will be attributed to any individual. Your responses will be

pooled with others and summarized only in an attempt to see themes, trends, and/or patterns. Only summarized information will be reported.

**QUESTIONS:** If you have any questions regarding the information that I have provided above, please do not hesitate to contact me, Jason Kujanen, at [contact information]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Dr. Doug Leigh, chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Pepperdine University, at [contact information].

Thank you for taking the time to read this information, and I hope you decide to participate.

Sincerely,

Jason D. Kujanen, MBA, PHR  
Graduate Student, Master of Science in Organization Development  
Graziadio School of Business and Management  
Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA  
[contact information]

**CONSENT: By participating in this interview, you are acknowledging that you have read and understand what your participation entails and are consenting to participate in the study.**

Do you wish to participate in this study? (Mark your choice with an X and return to Jason.Kujanen@pepperdine.edu).

\_\_\_\_ Yes, I wish to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_ No, I do not wish to participate in this study.

**Appendix C: Questionnaire**

## Appendix C: Questionnaire

**TITLE OF THE STUDY:** Cultural Transparency in a Virtual Work Environment

Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary. The following is a description of what your participation entails, the terms for participating, and a discussion of your rights as a study participant. Please read this information carefully before deciding whether or not you wish to participate.

**RESEARCHER'S NAME & AFFILIATION:** Jason D. Kujanen, Graduate Student, at the Graziadio School of Business and Management, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to determine if a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual work environment in the IT industry. While there may be a culture of transparency with external key stakeholders and the public, this study will only explore the non-confidential free flow of information internally from employee to employee, employees to leadership, and leadership to employees within one high-tech company in Silicon Valley.

**PROCEDURES:** If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to answer an online questionnaire. You will be asked questions about your experience working virtually. It is expected to take about 20 minutes. If you should decide to participate and find you are not interested in completing the survey in its entirety, you have the right to discontinue at any point without being questioned about your decision. You also do not have to answer any of the questions that you prefer not to answer. Terminating your participation at any time will not affect you professionally in any way.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is completely voluntary. Whether you participate or not does not affect your standing at your company or mine as a student. Should you decide not to participate, you are under no obligation to do so and can withdraw without penalty at any time.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. This is an opportunity for you to shed light on your experience working virtually. There are no major or minor risks associated with this study. The data will be kept in a secure manner for six (6) years, at which time the data will be destroyed.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The results learned from the questionnaire may be published in the form of articles, a book, or a research report; however, you will not be identified by name. Only the researcher will have direct access to the data. The confidentiality of individual records will be protected during and after the study, and anonymity will be preserved in the publication of the results. No names will be used to identify anyone who takes part. No comments will be attributed to any individual. Your responses will be pooled with others and summarized only in an attempt to see themes, trends, and/or patterns. Only summarized information will be reported in possible publication.

**QUESTIONS:** If you have any questions regarding the information provided above, please do not hesitate to contact me, Jason Kujanen, at [contact information]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Dr. Doug Leigh, chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Pepperdine University, at [contact information].

You are welcome to a brief summary of the study findings in about one (1) year. If you are interested in receiving the summary, please send me an email under separate cover to Jason.Kujanen.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information, and I hope you decide to participate.

Sincerely,

Jason D. Kujanen, MBA, PHR  
Graduate Student, Master of Science in Organization Development  
Graziadio School of Business and Management  
Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA  
[contact information]

**CONSENT:** By completing this survey, you are acknowledging that you have read and understand what your participation entails and are consenting to participate in the study. Do you wish to participate in this study?

Yes, I wish to participate in this study.

No, I do not wish to participate in this study.

Would you like documentation linking you with the study?

Yes, I wish documentation linking me to this study. Please send it to me at \_\_\_\_\_.

No, I do not wish documentation.

Demographics

1. Gender

- Male
- Female

2. Age category

- 20-29 years old
- 30-39 years old
- 40-49 years old
- 50-59 years old
- 60-69 years old
- 70-79 years old

Please read the definitions below before answering the survey questions:

- **Culture of Transparency:** The free flow of information within an organization and between the organization and its many stakeholders.
- **e-Presence:** The ability of technology to close the distance between manager and employee, employee and employee, and leadership and employee for information sharing, collaboration, and building trust.
- **Social Presence:** Being perceived as authentic, a real person, has been found to improve trust, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, and perceived learning.
- **Leadership Presence:** The ability to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others in order to motivate and inspire them to achieve a desired outcome.
- **Knowledge Presence:** The ability to facilitate learning, sharing, and creation of knowledge within a group, organization, or society. Information that is either tacit or explicit, which is accessible and shared freely.
- **Open Communication:** Open communication occurs when all parties are able to express ideas to one another, such as in a conversation or debate, without fear of retribution, paying the price, or losing face.

On a scale of 1–5, please select a number (5 being the most favorable with strongly agree) that best describes your experience presently working in a virtual work environment.

3. I have the tools which enable me to do my job effectively while working virtually.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
4. I have the tools which enable me to do my job effectively with employees who work remotely.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
5. When differences of opinion arise, people are willing to disagree with their manager.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
6. People are able to be honest and direct with opinions and ideas.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
7. It is ok to disagree with ideas—regardless of whose idea it is.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
8. Key messages and direction are communicated quickly and directly with employees.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
9. I have an opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect me.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
10. I trust the information I receive.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
11. I understand how my role contributes to achieving business outcomes.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
12. Communication between senior leaders and employees is good in my organization.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
13. Senior management and employees trust each other.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

14. I have the information I need to do my work right.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
15. I have the information I need to make critical decisions.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
16. Accessibility of information is readily available to complete my job tasks.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
17. My supervisor keeps me informed of company policies, processes, goals, milestones, actions.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
18. At work, my opinion seems to count.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
19. My organization has a safe working environment.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
20. I am satisfied with the culture of my workplace.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
21. I can disagree with my supervisor without fear of getting in trouble.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
22. I am comfortable sharing my opinions at work.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
23. We work to attract, develop, and retain people with diverse backgrounds.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
24. Senior management is genuinely interested in employee opinions and ideas.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
25. People with different ideas are valued in this organization.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
26. The necessary information systems are in place and accessible for me to get my job done.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
27. I understand how my work directly contributes to the overall success of the organization.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
28. I am familiar with and understand the organization's strategic goals.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
29. My manager is always consistent when administering policies concerning employees.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
30. I receive useful and constructive feedback from my manager.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
31. I feel connected with other employees in my company.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
32. I feel connected with other employees on my team.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
33. My manager promotes and encourages employees to collaborate through online communication tools such as company blogs, instant messaging, audio/video, group conferencing, online forums/discussion rooms, Skype, group discussion threads, or company-related Facebook pages.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
34. Online social tools are available and accessible for communication with employees.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree



35. There is a strong sense of an online social community where I work.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
36. My employer promotes a culture of learning, sharing, and creation of knowledge.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

**37. What are your personal top three factors for an open and transparent virtual work environment?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**38. Please rank in the order of importance (1 through 15, 1 being the most important) what factor below makes you feel more alive and engaged while at work?**

- \_\_\_ Senior leadership presence
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of virtual technology platforms
- \_\_\_ Regular interaction with manager
- \_\_\_ Trust
- \_\_\_ Opportunities for growth
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of management
- \_\_\_ Challenging projects
- \_\_\_ Compensation
- \_\_\_ Feedback
- \_\_\_ Teamwork/collaboration
- \_\_\_ Rewards & recognition
- \_\_\_ Work/life balance
- \_\_\_ Performance & accountability
- \_\_\_ Personal expression—open communication
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies
- \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**39. Is there anything you would like to share regarding your virtual experience as a remote employee?**

Thank you for completing the survey.

**Appendix D: Interview Script**

## Appendix D: Interview Script

Thank you for signing a consent form to participate in this research. As you are aware, this interview is strictly voluntary and will be used to help the researcher gain greater depth and understanding of cultural transparency in a virtual work environment. You may withdraw from the interview at any time or pass on answering a question without penalty to yourself or the researcher. Your participation is appreciated.

### Part 1: Open-Ended Questions Regarding Results of Survey

1. Do you agree with the overall results of whether a culture of transparency is a key contributor impacting employee engagement in a virtual workforce? Why? What factor below do you find is the most necessary for employee engagement in a virtual work environment? Why? Are there any missing factors? If yes, please explain.
  - a. e-Presence
  - b. Social Presence
  - c. Knowledge Presence
  - d. Leadership Presence
  
2. How do you make sense of the following ranking results (1 being most favorable) for what makes an employee feel more alive and engaged at work? Is there any ranking you strongly disagree or agree with? Why?

- \_\_\_ Senior leadership presence
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of virtual technology platforms
- \_\_\_ Regular interaction with manager
- \_\_\_ Trust
- \_\_\_ Opportunities for growth
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of management
- \_\_\_ Challenging projects
- \_\_\_ Compensation
- \_\_\_ Feedback
- \_\_\_ Teamwork/collaboration
- \_\_\_ Rewards & recognition
- \_\_\_ Work/life balance
- \_\_\_ Performance & accountability
- \_\_\_ Personal expression—open communication
- \_\_\_ Accessibility of processes/procedures/policies
- \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How do you make sense of the responses to question #37 (survey), which is an open-ended question regarding an employee's personal top three factors for being open or transparent in a virtual work environment?
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.

#### Part 2: Open-Ended Questions Regarding Personal Experience

4. Tell me about a time when you felt highly engaged while working remotely.
5. Tell me about your most memorable experience reporting to a manager offsite at another work location? What has been your most favorable experience? What has been your least favorable experience? Why?
6. What does senior leadership presence mean to you and why? Is senior leadership presence important to you?
7. Tell me about your most recent experience when you needed information to complete a job task? Where did you find the information you needed? How did you find the information you needed?
8. Please share anything else you believe is relevant to this study of transparency in a virtual work environment.