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Executive Flow Experiences and Coaching in South African Workplaces

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Management in Business Executive Coaching

Johannesburg, 2017

ABSTRACT

A flow experience is described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the founding thought leader of the experience, as “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement” (1975, p.43). Flow experiences have been linked to positive outcomes for individuals and organisations (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008; Privette, 1983; Salanova, Bakker, & Llorens, 2006) suggesting that this is a desirable experience to facilitate in the workplace. Csikszentmihalyi states that there is much that can be done to introduce more flow to the day-to-day experiences of life, including at work (1999), yet, despite the documented role of organisational leaders as “climate engineers” (Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009, p. 37) there has been no specific consideration of the flow experiences of executives as leaders.

The possible relationship between coaching and flow experiences has to date received attention in mainstream literary circles, and superficial attention in academic literature (Britton, 2008; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007). Coaching executives to achieve flow has not been considered in existing literature in the Executive Coaching domain, but since Executive Coaching is still viewed as emerging (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008), a confirmation that Executive Coaching can be applied to foster flow experiences in the workplace would add to the credibility of this field.

The purpose of this study has been to identify how the emerging discipline of Executive Coaching can facilitate the creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces. The answer to this question has been sought through building an understanding of how flow is experienced by executives in the workplace, and then investigating how flow experiences can be facilitated in executive workplaces. The research study adopted a qualitative approach due to the known suitability of this method to consider the life experiences of participants. Face- to-face, semi-structured interviews were used as the core data collection method addressing a sample size of 16 respondents, made up of 13 executives and three

executive coaches. This approach has previously been applied to collect rich narrative data on flow experiences.

The study found that whilst executive flow experiences show some commonalities with the existing literature on flow and flow experiences at work, several distinct antecedents for and characteristics of executive flow were identifiable. These precursors and features of executive flow were attributed at three levels: a) at the level of the organisation; b) through the type of work, and c) at the individual level. Executive experiences of anti-flow, the opposite of flow, were also identified. These were typically characterised and initiated by opposite factors to those linked to flow experiences. The study outcomes identified the ability of executives to proactively pursue flow experiences, and further showed that self-awareness and an awareness and use of one's strengths increase the likelihood of flow experiences. The study thus found that there clear focus areas exist which can be manipulated through interventions to increase likelihood of executive flow experiences. The study outcome that the three areas that impact executive flow experiences correlate to Executive Coaching focus areas introduces the possibility that coaching may be a suitable intervention to increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences. This developing hypothesis is subsequently supported by the final research theme that Executive Coaching may be able to support the executive in cultivating the respective individual, organisational and work conditions to increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work.

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DECLARATION

I, Carmen Whateley declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Carmen Whateley

Signed at Johannesburg

On the 28th day of February 2017

DEDICATION

I dedicate the outcome of this academic labour of love to my late father, Lisle Cronwright, who just missed walking this journey with me, but whose lifelong fuel to my intellectual fire burns on.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been a labour of love, fuelled by the unquestioning love of my gorgeous children, Samantha and Claire, and the patience and support of my partner, best friend, and husband, Scott Whateley. Their unwavering support of and belief in me freed me to pursue my own joy in this academic exploration. Following closely is my gratitude for the consummate love of my Mom, Hannetjie Cronwright, with us both having lost access to my Dad's wisdom just weeks before this journey began. To my family-in-law, from my mother and father-in-law, Pam and Mike Whateley, to my "adopted" aunt and uncle Chris and Geoff Walter, I express my thanks for your constant willingness to spend time with little Clixie as I worked my way through this maze of intellectual pleasure.

I am thankful for the openness and willingness to share I encountered from my research respondents, whose experiences have opened up some new possibilities for their peers to experience enjoyment at work. To the MMBEC cohort of 2015/2016, I remain in awe of the camaraderie and mutual support we shared in a steadfast and often humorous manner; may you all go forth and change the world with your coaching.

Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Kerrin Myres for being my research guide over this two-year journey, providing the beacons on the road, and the constructive critique needed to keep me committed to the outcome the research could offer.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the study

Since its publication in 1975, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's seminal work on the concept of flow has received a significant amount of attention. Csikszentmihalyi defines a flow experience as "the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement" (1975, p.43). In this narrative extract from the same work, he describes the concept of flow in the context of climbing.

> "Climbing is the same; recognizing that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing; you move up only to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for climbing except the climbing itself; it is a self-communication." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p 54).

Subsequent studies have found flow to have to have positive outcomes for individuals and organisations (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008; Privette, 1983; Salanova, Bakker, & Llorens, 2006) suggesting that this is a desirable experience to facilitate in the workplace.

The purpose of this study is to identify how the emerging discipline of Executive Coaching can facilitate the creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces.

1.2 Context of the study

Flow experiences have positive outcomes for individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b), the people around them (Bakker, 2005) and for organisations (Salanova et al., 2006). The individual that achieves flow in the workplace is able to maximise learning and experience enjoyment, resulting in positive performance (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). These outcomes can be transferred to those around them (Bakker, 2005), while the organisation benefits from increased

employee performance (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008; Salanova et al., 2006). To this end, the flow concept, whilst originating out of studies of leisure activities (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b; Kowal & Fortier, 1999) has been applied to and developed further for the workplace (Bakker, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Salanova et al., 2006). Flow experiences have been found to be more intense at work than those in leisure activities (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), and flow has been confirmed to be a state variable that can be influenced by external situations and events to foster its creation (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009).

Organisations benefit from the flow experiences of individuals in the workplace as flow fosters innovation (Britton, 2008), improves employee performance at work (Bakker, 2008, p. 180; Demerouti, 2006; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010), supports greater employee well-being and engagement (Mäkikangas, Bakker, Aunola, & Demerouti, 2010, p. 797), and supports the accumulation of organisational resources over time (Salanova et al., 2006). These organisational resources have been found to foster increased commitment to the organisation and in turn, reduce absenteeism (Bakker, Demerouti, De Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003).

Existing literature on flow in the workplace has identified organisational and task elements that facilitate flow whilst at work, including work activities, and required organisational resources (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Salanova et al., 2006). The possible personality characteristics that may moderate the flow outcome have also been considered (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Demerouti, 2006; Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). However, little has been documented on the experience of flow by executives in the workplace and secondly, on the manner in which flow can be facilitated or enhanced through specific interventions such as Executive Coaching.

Coaching as a developmental intervention is reported as early as the 1950s, assisting in correcting weaknesses and facilitating learning towards peak performances (Feldman & Lankau, 2005), akin to flow (Privette, 1983). Stern

(2005; p. 155), working up to a definition of Executive Coaching (EC), noted that:

> Regardless of the formality of the EC and who is providing it, what actually goes on in the coaching is driven by its objectives and the needs and preferences of the executive and the organization. It may entail any or all of the following: changing attitudes and habits; developing skills; preparing and developing for future assignments; and defining and implementing one's leadership charter, business goals, and strategies.

This assessment reflects the adaptability of the Executive Coaching process to specific outcomes, depending on the nature of the circumstances in question. According to Kilburg (1996), Executive Coaching applies to both the personal development of the executive and the business context within which the executive operates.

The relationship between coaching and flow experiences has received some limited attention in academic literature (Britton, 2008; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007). Coaching executives to achieve flow has not been considered in existing literature in the Executive Coaching domain. Furthermore, the field of Executive Coaching is still viewed as emerging (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008). It would therefore seem that a study that showed that Executive Coaching can foster flow experiences in the workplace would add to the credibility of this field and offer new insights and knowledge into both the flow and the Executive Coaching domains.

1.3 Problem statement

1.3.1 *Main problem*

The main research problem is to identify how Executive Coaching can facilitate creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces.

1.3.2 *Sub-problems*

The first sub-problem is to understand how flow is experienced by executives in the workplace.

The second sub-problem is to investigate how flow experiences can be facilitated in executive workplaces.

Finally the study aims to identify how the coaching process should function to facilitate the experience of flow in executive workplaces.

1.3.3 *Scope of the study*

The study considers the scope outlined in the Figure 1 below within the corporate workplace. The research process considers key aspects of Executive Coaching as a discipline, espoused in coaching theory, considering the typical purpose of Executive Coaching and existing coaching models to provide an adequate understanding of the coaching process, which in turn is expected to support identifying possible causal links to flow experiences at work.

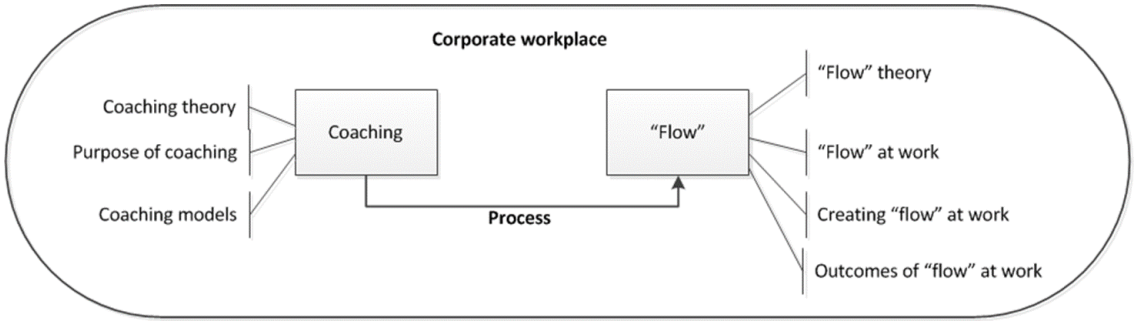


Figure 1. Factors considered in the research process to identify how Executive Coaching can facilitate creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces

The concept of flow in original flow theory is considered, including subsequent application and refinement of flow theory to experiences at work. To support the identification of any possible relationship between Executive Coaching and flow

at work, the study investigates how flow experiences can be created at work and the outcomes that can be expected.

It is expected that this scope will provide the necessary insights to address the key research question.

1.4 Significance of the study

Csikszentmihalyi (1999) states that there is much that can be done to introduce more flow to the day-to-day experiences of life, including at work. Whilst existing research on flow in the workplace has identified task/job and organisational resource characteristics (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Salanova et al., 2006) that foster flow, the outcome of this study may provide a more focused application of flow experiences at work through its consideration of executives in the workplace.

This research topic may also address the need identified by Passmore & Fillery-Travis (2011) for greater insight into the areas where coaching is suited, potentially highlighting an additional, powerful application of Executive Coaching in particular. The research outcome could facilitate development of relevant, practical tools to enhance executive and organisational performance through coaching for flow. This may give particular impetus to the adoption of Executive Coaching in the South African environment where this coaching practice has yet to be adopted as a mainstream intervention (Attlee, 2013).

The outcome of this study may offer a theoretical contribution to the current body of knowledge on flow experiences at work by offering insights on this experience for executives in particular.

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Absorption at work	Total immersion in an activity.	Bakker (2005)
Anti-flow	The opposite of flow. A sense of boredom or frustration in an activity experienced as meaningless, tedious and offering little challenge.	Allison & Duncan (1988)
Autotelic experience	An experience that is sought out for its own sake, for the enjoyment it brings.	Wright, Sadlo, & Stew (2007)
Enjoyment	Enjoyment experienced by an individual when stretching beyond current capabilities.	Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)
Executive	An individual who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization at either a middle or senior management level.	Feldman & Lankau (2005)

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Executive Coaching	A process that primarily (but not exclusively) takes place within a one-to-one helping and facilitative relationship between a coach and an executive (or a manager) that enables the executive (or a manager) to achieve personal-, job- or organizational-related goals with an intention to improve organizational performance.	Hamlin et al. (2008)
Experience Sampling Method	Experience Sampling Method (ESM) is a qualitative research technique that captures the immediate conscious experience via self-reports that are prompted via electronic signals at random times throughout the day.	Engeser & Rheinberg (2008)
Extra-role performance	Delivering outputs that extend past the job description but still result in organisational effectiveness.	Bakker (2008)

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Flow	The holistic sensation when an individual acts with total involvement	Csikszentmihalyi (1975a)
Flow activities	“Structured systems of action” that assist in producing flow experiences.	Csikszentmihalyi (1975b)
Flow at work	A short term peak experience that is characterised by absorption, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation.	Bakker (2005)
Gestalt coaching	A coaching school that values the use of present-centred awareness, client coach interaction and experimentation to raise coachee awareness and facilitate substantial change.	Stevenson (2005)

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Pleasure	Pleasure experienced from satisfying basic needs such as hunger, thirst etc	Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)
Humanistic coaching	An approach to coaching that is grounded in the principles of Humanistic Psychology that views the individual to have a natural drive to growth in order to reach their full potential. Coaching is deemed to be about growth and change.	Stober (2006)
In-role performance	Achieving the core requirements of the job.	Bakker (2008)
Intrinsic motivation	A construct that shows the propensity for individuals to “learn and assimilate”.	Ryan & Deci (2000, p. 54)
	Participating in activities because they are experienced as “interesting, challenging, and enjoyable”.	Moneta (2012, p. 491)

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Job characteristics model of work motivation	A model that looks at core job dimensions that support motivational outcomes of work.	Hackman & Oldham (1976)
Leisure time	Discretionary time free from obligations or during which intrinsically rewarding activities are undertaken.	Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre (1989)
Narrative-collaborative coaching practice	An approach to coaching characterised by a collaborative conversation between the coach and the coaching client through which the coaching client's story can be "re-authored".	Stelter, Law, Allé, Campus, & Lane (2010, p.152)
Neuro-linguistic coaching approach	A coaching model informed by the theories of the neuro-linguistic programming communication model, differentiated by its focus on the coaching client's internal representation and language processes to support growth and change.	Linder-Pelz & Hall (2007)

1.5 **Definition of terms**

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Peak experience	“Intense joy” or a “highly valued moment”.	Privette (1983, p. 1361)
Peak performance	Derived from humanistic psychology, referring to a positive experience characterised by superior functioning.	Privette (1983)
Positive psychology coaching	A school of coaching that draws upon the tradition of Positive Psychology to assist coaching clients in achieving happiness and well-being.	Kauffman (2006)
State variable	A term that originates from psychology of personality for a behaviour that occurs due to a fleeting external (eg. social, physiological, or environmental) condition.	Allen & Potkay (1981)

1.5 Definition of terms

Table 1 **-** Definition Of Terms

Term	Definition	Reference
Strengths-based coaching	An approach to coaching that identifies and harnesses individual's natural abilities to harness the full potential of the coaching client.	Linley & Harrington (2006)

1.6 Assumptions

The study assumes that it is possible to gain access to and that coaches applying a positive psychology method can be identified and accessed for the study. Finally it is presumed that executives have experienced flow in the workplace, are able to understand flow, and recall flow experiences honestly.

1.7 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 contains a review of existing literature. This establishes the current academic landscape pertaining to both Executive Coaching and the construct of flow, the existing relationship identified between the two concepts and gaps in this knowledge. This assessment informs the Research Methodology outlined in Chapter 3. The methodology discussion includes the research paradigm, design and approach for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 outlines the findings from the application of the research methodology, incorporating verbatim descriptions from study participants to highlight key emerging points. A discussion of these findings and links to the existing literature are provided in

Chapter 5. Chapter 6 contains an illustration of how these study outcomes address the research questions originally posed. It concludes with a proposed framework to be adopted in Executive Coaching to improve the likelihood of executive flow experiences at work. A detailed description of each aspect of the framework and how it is supported by the data analysis is provided. The study concludes with an assessment of the limitations of the study and identifies the emerging areas for future research to guide future development of the topic.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study is to investigate how Executive Coaching should function to facilitate flow in executive workplaces. An exploration of existing literature on executive flow experiences at work provides a definition for flow and outlines how it is experienced at work. The review subsequently considers how flow can be facilitated in the workplace, considering previous research findings on the causes of flow in the workplace, and the typical outcomes of workplace flow experiences. Finally the review outlines existing information on how coaching can facilitate flow.

2.2 Definition of flow

2.2.1 *What is flow?*

> Perhaps you know this special feeling that everything suddenly seems to go by itself. You are so concentrated on your task that you forget everybody and everything around you. Time flies without noticing it. You can concentrate effortlessly, everything goes smoothly, and you really enjoy what you do. You know exactly where you want to go, and you have the feeling of total control. Nothing seems to be able to stop you, and you are totally immersed in what you are doing. In a way, you have the feeling that you coincide with the activity at hand. At that moment, simply nothing else exists. You feel as if in another reality and that is a very enjoyable experience (Bakker, 2008, p. 407)

The concept of flow, also referred to as an optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), emerged out of a study initiated to understand the enjoyment process, more specifically why people do things for which there is no clear external reward (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). This research focused on describing

individuals' experiences when participating in play activities, known for their enjoyment and spontaneity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). The term flow was found to be an appropriate descriptor for such activities, deemed to relate to an holistic experience that is so absorbing and enjoyable that it is pursued for its own sake, even if there are no other consequences of performing it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1975b; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Flow describes "how people feel when they are thoroughly involved in something that is enjoyable and meaningful to the person" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 825).

Core characteristics of flow experiences, the qualities that made play activities enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b), are identified as an ability to focus on a limited scope of activity of which the individuals perceive they have the skills to meet its demands. This results in an absence of the individuals' awareness of their problems and a loss of self-awareness, whilst they maintain control over their environment; and enjoy the activity for its own sake rather than any other external reason. This is referred to as an autotelic experience. This description has evolved since then to a simpler description as shared by Csikszentmihalyi (1992, pp. 32-33) that flow occurs when a balance is attained between the individual's skill and the challenge of the activity performed; the activity has clear goals, and immediate feedback ; the individual experiences a "merging of action and awareness"; the outcomes of the flow activity are within the individual's control; a distorted experience of time; loss of ego; high level of concentration on the task; and the activity is intrinsically rewarding (autotelic).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975b) put forward a model of flow states to clarify the overall nature of activities that would facilitate flow. The overarching requirement is that the activity needs a balance between the challenges of the activity, and the skills of the individual. It was predicted that activities requiring a higher skill level than that of the individual would result in anxiety on the part of the individual rather than flow; whilst situations where the skills of the individual exceed those required by the activity would result in boredom as depicted in the original flow diagram in Figure 2 below.

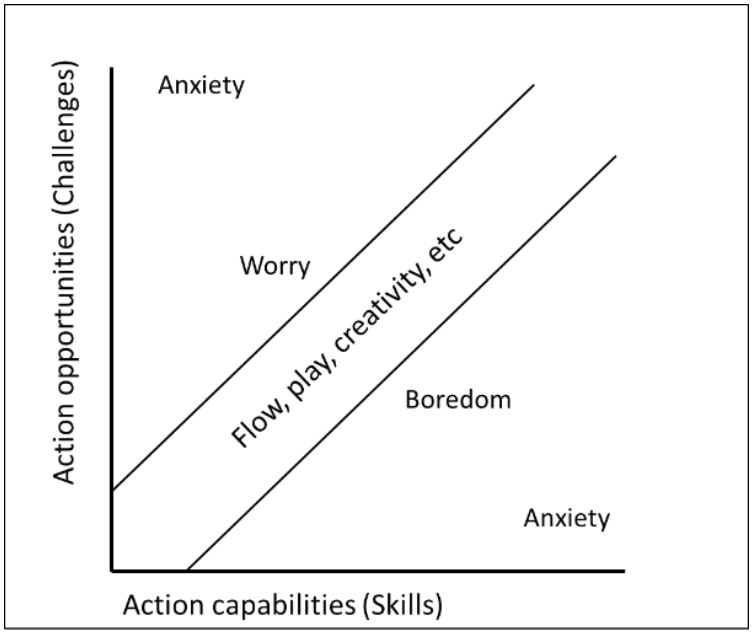


Figure 2. Model of the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b, p. 56)

An enhanced model of flow is shared by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi to enable a richer description of flow experiences. The updated illustration also indicates how the intensity of the flow experience transitions to greater intensity the further it moves away from the flow zone (2002, p. 95).

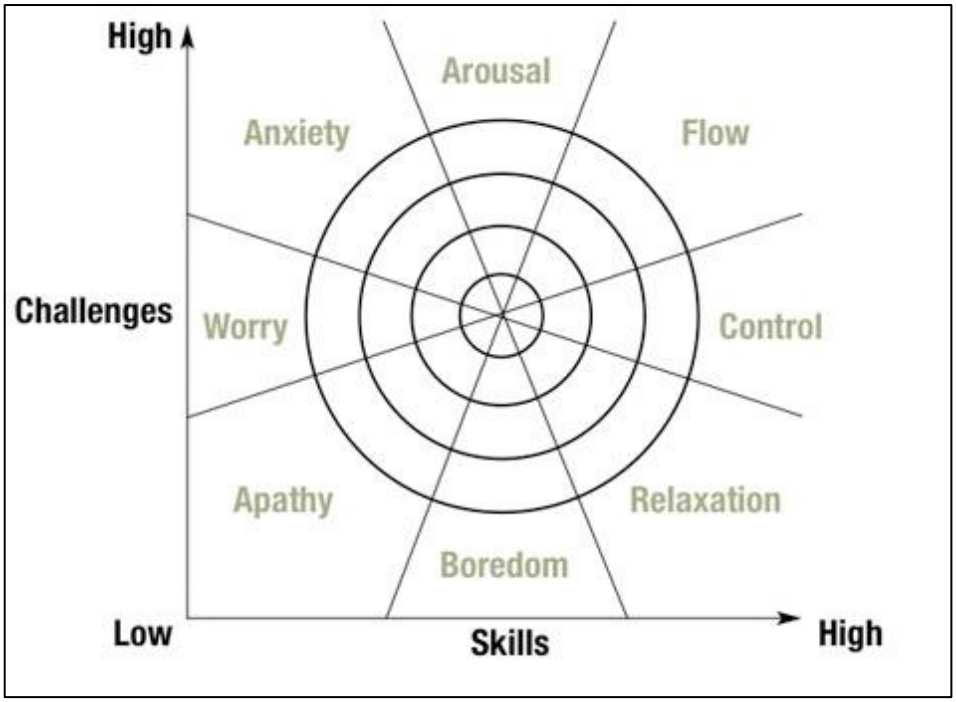


Figure 3. Updated flow channel model as presented by Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) which enables a richer description of flow

The personality characteristics that would most likely foster flow experiences have been identified in some studies (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Demerouti, 2006). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) draw the distinction between enjoyment and pleasure in respect of flow, emphasising that flow experiences equate to enjoyment not pleasure. Pleasure is deemed as *hedonic* and transient, whilst enjoyment is *eudemonic*, encouraging individuals to stretch their capabilities with resultant growth. This point is emphasised by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) who confirmed that flow experiences encourage personal growth as individuals look to adjust their skill levels on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are able to repeat the flow experience.

It is interesting to note that flow experiences may not always result in positive outcomes. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) observes that a lack of meaningful activities can result in looking for flow in destructive activities such as crime. When an individual experiences flow to such an extent that alternative activities are

rejected, this could result in limited options for growth as other opportunities are not pursued (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Flow has been found to have commonalities with positive experiences such as the concept of peak experience as defined by Maslow and the more transactional concept of peak performance (Privette, 1983). It has formed the basis of research in the fields of sport (Kowal & Fortier, 1999), intrinsic motivation (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, 2012; Kowal & Fortier, 1999), work (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), occupational health (Wright et al., 2007) and most recently it is a core element within the emerging field of positive psychology (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Despite the direct links between positive psychology and the emerging field of coaching (Kauffman, 2006; Kauffman & Scoular, 2004; Linley & Harrington, 2005), current literature on the concept of flow does not include any empirical consideration of the potential implications of coaching practice upon flow experiences.

2.2.2 *Flow at work*

One of the earliest reviews that considered flow experiences at work identified the experiences of flow for women in work and other contexts (Allison & Duncan, 1988). Of interest was that this study highlighted the experience of not only flow, but also its opposite, anti-flow, and how the study participants were able to intervene in their activities to reduce anti-flow by establishing clear routines (Allison & Duncan, 1988). The type of tasks that created anti-flow were identified as tedious, simple and repetitive (Allison & Duncan, 1988) within situations of low control, low challenge, inadequate leadership and, as predicted in the Flow State Model depicted in Figure 2, resulted in boredom.

The concept of flow in the workplace has since generated a vast array of research, particularly since Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) demonstrated that the chance of achieving a flow experience is higher at work than at leisure. They attributed this to it being easier to experience the application of skills in a challenging situation at work. Paradoxically individuals still reported greater

satisfaction in leisure than in work. This was attributed to the mandatory nature of work versus leisure, but is thought to pose an opportunity to enhance job satisfaction through an acknowledgement of the positive impact of flow experience at work (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989).

A later study into flow in the workplace confirmed the finding that flow occurs more in work than in leisure, and was also able to attribute flow experiences at work to well-being (Bryce & Haworth, 2002). This research also identified that there are different factors that give rise to flow experiences in the workplace for men and for women. This literature does not reflect the possible implications of coaching interventions on flow experiences in the workplace.

The current definition of flow as specifically experienced in the workplace was derived by Bakker (2005, p. 401) stating that "when flow is applied to the work situation, it can be defined as a short-term peak experience at work that is characterized by absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation." The literature on flow in the workplace considers multiple occupations, ranging from white collar and blue collar workers (Allison & Duncan, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), music teachers (Bakker, 2005), and secondary high school teachers (Salanova et al., 2006) to accountants and care workers (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). Flow experiences of executives in the workplace have however not yet been considered.

2.3 Facilitating flow experiences in the workplace

Research studies on flow experiences in the workplace have identified three categories of facilitating factors for such experiences, namely, individual resources (Salanova et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2007), organisational resources (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010), and job resources (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Moneta, 2012). The possibility to optimise work for flow (Bakker, 2005), and opportunities to develop

specific interventions to facilitate flow at work (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010) have also emerged and are described below.

The possible application of flow theory to leaders, managers and for business more broadly are explored in the book Good business: Leadership, flow, and the making of meaning by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2004). Whilst this is a compelling application of flow theory to the business sphere, it does not consider the specific characteristics of flow at work, nor does it intend to provide insight into the flow experiences of executives at work. A gap remains in the current literature on flow experiences of executives in the workplace.

2.3.1 *Causes of flow in the workplace – individual/personal resources*

Allison and Duncan (1988) in their early study of women, work and flow, identified certain factors that would likely accommodate women experiencing flow at work. Respondents demonstrated a feeling of mastery and control as well as a perception of individual autonomy and freedom when interacting with others when in flow (Allison & Duncan, 1988).

Personal characteristics impacting on flow emerged in the work of Salanova, Bakker and Llorens (2006) who found a positive causal relationship between self-efficacy at the individual level, and social support, climate and clear goals at the organisational level and flow in the workplace. This study further identified that flow at work reinforces self-efficacy and organisational resources to create an upward, reinforcing spiral (Salanova et al., 2006).

The personal resource of conscientiousness, explained as high goal-orientation and a hardworking nature, curtails the relationship between flow and performance (Demerouti, 2006). Conscientiousness is further described as keeping individuals focused on the correct goals at work, rather than enjoying flow from activities that do not relate to organisational outcomes. It has been demonstrated that a personal feeling of competence may be able to predict flow in future circumstances at work (Salanova et al., 2006).

A study by Wright, Sadlow and Stew (2007) provided insight into the experience of mindfulness by individuals when experiencing challenge and skills and work enjoyment. This study further suggested the “possible importance of meaning and context” of the occupation for the individual at work, to support the likelihood of a flow experience (Wright et al., 2007, p. 141). More recently, a perception that one’s work has a positive impact on others has been found to contribute to more regular flow experiences (Maeran & Cangiano, 2013).

2.3.2 *Causes of flow in the workplace – job resources*

Bakker (2005) identified that certain job resources, namely social support, supervisory coaching, autonomy and feedback, could facilitate the probability of flow experiences characterised by absorption, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. The emerging model, depicted in Figure 4, also demonstrates Bakker’s (2005) finding that flow can be transferred between individuals in the workplace.

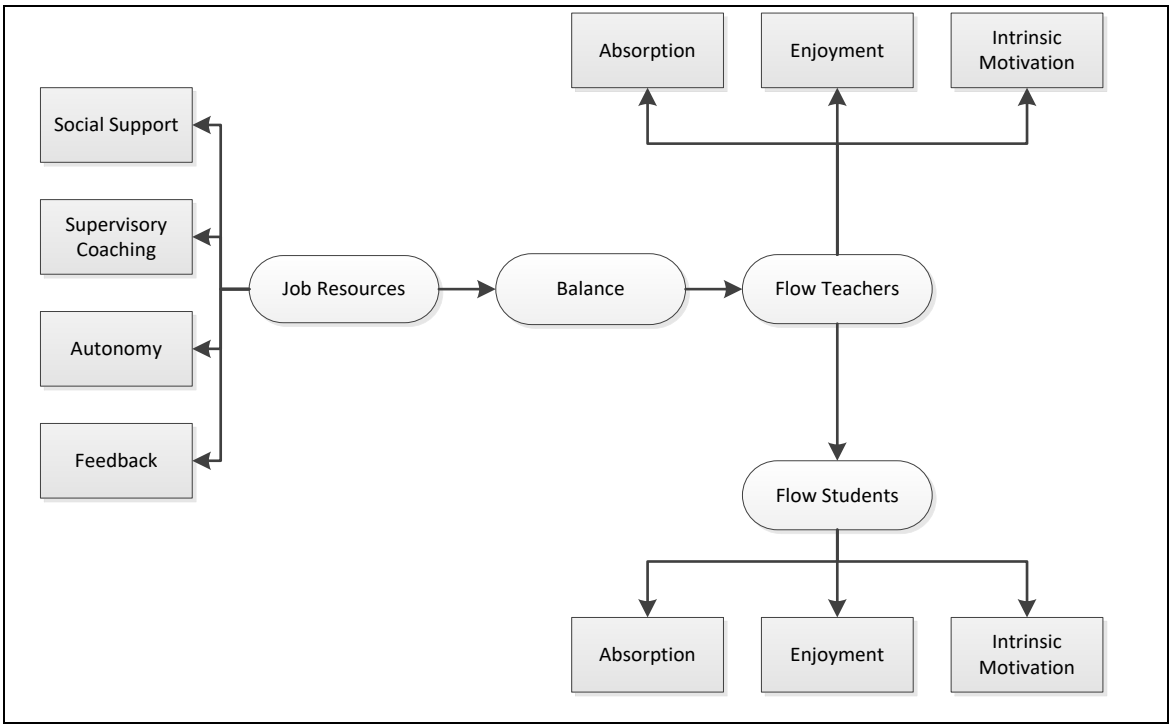


Figure 4. The model of flow at work by Bakker (2005, p 29) to illustrate the causes, characteristics and transferability of flow between teachers and students

Demerouti (2006) reported a positive link between flow and job performance. This study, and later another study by Fullager and Kelloway (2009), further confirmed a positive relationship between flow and the core job characteristics of the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) of Hackman and Oldham (1976). The JCM outlines five core job characteristics that influence workers' attitudes and behavior. These are skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). It is worth noting the difference between feedback noted as one of the characteristics of flow from the original flow theory, where feedback is typically received from the activity itself (M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, p. 32), whilst in the JCM the feedback is defined as coming from co-workers (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

An additional antecedent for flow at the job level was described by Moneta (2012) who linked the degree of opportunity for creativity in a work activity to the likelihood of flow being experienced. This outcome suggested that a possible intervention to foster flow at work could be to consider the degree of creativity in the work.

The application of the work-related flow characteristics of absorption, work enjoyment and intrinsic motivation in South African work environments has been confirmed through a study conducted by Geyser (2015). This study is the first to consider flow in a South African environment, but does not address the specific experiences of executives.

2.3.3 *Causes of flow in the workplace – organisational resources*

Salanova, Bakker and Llorens (2006) identified what the study refers to as "types of organisational climate orientation indicators" (Salanova et al., 2006, p. 16) of social support, innovation and clear rules having a positive impact on the likelihood of a flow experience at work, across various combinations of these factors. The study by Fullager and Kelloway not only suggested that flow can be derived through appropriate work design, that is, task characteristics, but also established that the organisational situational context characteristics could create the right conditions for flow experiences at work (2009).

A similar theme emerged in Moneta's consideration of flow at work, supporting a hypothesis that "person-environment" matching supports flow at work (Moneta, 2012, p. 491).

2.3.4 *Ability to proactively pursue flow experiences at work*

The ability to manipulate flow in the workplace through addressing certain personal and situational variables was ascertained by Fullagar and Kelloway (2009) who found that flow is attributed more to a state of mind than to a personality characteristic. The study further confirmed the link between the job

dimensions of skill, variety, and autonomy from the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and flow, suggesting that tasks could be enriched by manipulating these dimensions (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009).

Further predictors of flow at work were confirmed in a study by Nielsen and Cleal (2010), using a specific nine item flow scale in conjunction with the Experience Sampling Method, in considering the activities that could predict flow experiences at work.

This study added to existing knowledge by establishing that planning, problem-solving, and evaluation activities are significant predictors of flow. This outcome led the authors to conclude that it is possible to develop interventions in the workplace to produce flow experiences (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). In a study looking to identify the differences between men and women in respect of flow experiences at work, Bryce and Haworth (2002) considered work flow activities of "problem-solving, dealing with conflict, meeting deadlines and achieving goals, planning meetings, negotiating with customers and learning new skills and roles etc. at work" (Bryce & Haworth, 2002, p. 258).

Despite a rich body of knowledge on causes of flow in the workplace, there is no documented consideration of the specific antecedents of flow for individuals fulfilling executive roles. The literature does not reflect possible implications of coaching interventions on the initiation of flow in the workplace.

2.3.5 *Outcomes of flow in the workplace*

Positive personal outcomes of enjoyment and satisfaction are identified as outcomes in the initial study by Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989), a list increased by Bryce and Haworth (2002) whose study listed contentment, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction emanating from flow experiences in the workplace. The ability for flow to be passed on to others was recognised in the study of music teachers and students by Bakker (2005). Individual well-being

has also been identified as being fostered by flow (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Wright et al., 2007).

At the organisational level, the literature links flow to clear positive performance outcomes (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). This performance outcome has been attributed to the finding that flow causes positive mood (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009). Bakker (2008) reports a distinction between work enjoyment, and that it is the best predictor of in-role performance, and intrinsic motivation, which projects extra-role performance. Flow experiences are further linked to workplace outcomes of innovation, energy, and skills (Britton, 2008).

The ability for flow experiences to generate positive outcomes at both the individual and organisational level is demonstrated by the observation by Salanova et al. (2006) that flow can generate self-efficacy and organisational resources in the future.

The literature on the outcomes of flow at work does not consider flow experiences of executives specifically, nor does it consider flow experiences as a possible outcome of a coaching intervention.

2.4 How the coaching process functions

This section of the literature review focuses on the field of Executive Coaching, how it typically applies in the workplace and considers possible theory or knowledge on pre-identified relationships between the coaching process and flow.

2.4.1 *Coaching models*

The practice of coaching provides an alternative to counselling and typical models of therapy, being far more aligned to the recently evolved school of Positive Psychology with its forward-looking, goal oriented approach to supporting

individuals as opposed to the “negative bias” of traditional psychology models where the focus is on that which is wrong with the individual (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). The focus of a therapy intervention is to heal individuals and shift them into a more functional space, typically by understanding and overcoming causality (Stober, 2006). Some of the defining characteristics of coaching as opposed to traditional psychology are: a) coaching facilitates individuals living their lives to the fullest extent possible (Stober, 2006); and b) it is action-oriented to support individual achievement of success in work and life (Langdridge, 2012). As opposed to therapy, coaching works with “non-clinical populations” (Langdridge, 2012, p. 85; Palmer & Whybrow, 2014). Coaching questions are intended to shift away from diagnosis and problems to potential and solutions (Linley & Harrington, 2006).

Multiple different coaching models have emerged, typically underpinned by different schools of psychology (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010; Ives, 2008; Kauffman, Boniwell, & Silberman, 2010; Langdridge, 2012; Linley & Harrington, 2006; Stelter et al., 2010; Stevenson, 2005; Stober, 2006), each offering a slightly different lens to the other. Humanistic Coaching reflects a belief that individuals have a self-actualising tendency, an ability to move forward and to reach a point of “wholeness” where they are functioning at their best (Stober, 2006, p. 25). This model further considers the uniqueness of the individual and the need to consider the individual in relation to their environment (Stober, 2006).

The criticality of the coachee’s self-awareness for successful coaching is highlighted by Stevenson (2005) who describes a Gestalt approach to coaching. The achievement of self-awareness as an outcome from coaching has also been identified by Wales (2002), Neenan and Palmer who describe a Cognitive Behavioural approach to coaching (2001) and Rogers in a Handbook on Coaching Skills (2012). The role of Executive Coaching to emphasise an executive’s self-awareness has been documented by Joo (2005) and Executive

Coaching as a tool for coachees to enhance their understanding of the self and of their work is expressed by Moen and Kvalsund (2008).

Stelter and Law (2010) describe a model for narrative-collaborative coaching practice which looks to apply coaching as a reflective space, providing a tool for the self-reflection needed to support the aforementioned awareness (Stelter, 2009). The opportunity for reflective learning through the coaching process is documented by Brockbank (2006). A Neuro-linguistic approach to coaching provides techniques to map out the subjective know-how and constructed experience of the coaching client (Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2007).

A Strengths-based coaching model shifts the focus from considering problems to rather considering individual potential and solutions, harnessing the individual coachee's strengths to optimise personal outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2006). It is recommended that the starting point for such a coaching engagement is to conduct an assessment of the individual's strengths using well-documented tools (Linley & Harrington, 2006). A specific application in the work setting is described as "to help them identify, value and celebrate their inner capacities and strengths, to help them understand why sometimes they feel 'in their element' at work, and at other times they feel tired, disengaged and de-motivated" (Linley and Harrington, p. 41). Closely allied to Strengths-based Coaching is a model of Positive Psychology Coaching (Kauffman et al., 2010) which fosters a focussed and "purposeful change" (Kauffman et al., 2010, p. 179). Coachees are guided to consider their strengths, positive behaviours and purpose as inputs into the desired forward-looking outcome.

2.4.2 *Executive Coaching*

The literature reflects multiple definitions for the concept of Executive Coaching (Hamlin et al., 2008; Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 1996; Stern, 2004). For the purposes of this study Executive Coaching refers to

> a process that primarily (but not exclusively) takes place within a one-to-one helping and facilitative relationship between a coach and an executive (or a manager) that enables the executive (or a manager) to achieve personal-, job- or organizational-related goals with an intention to improve organizational performance. (Hamlin et al., 2008).

The reason for selecting this definition is that it accommodates many of the unique characteristics that emerge in the literature to delineate Executive Coaching, including its one-to-one style (Stern, 2004) and the consistent theme that Executive Coaching has two parallel areas of focus, namely, personal and organisational goals (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Wasylyshyn, 2003).

This study combines elements of Kilburg (1996) and Feldman and Lankau's (2005) definitions respectively to describe an executive as an individual who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation at either a middle or senior management level. This definition allows the study to consider the executive roles across multiple organisational levels, but still at a leadership level.

Executive Coaching is reported to emanate from several pre-existing practices. Wasylyshyn (2003) outlines how Executive Coaching emanated out of psychological practices such as psychotherapy. Hamlin et al. (2005) refer to various professions in the business context such as organisational development and human resource development as spawning Executive Coaching. Joo (2005) indicates that practices which combined organisational development and psychology approaches were applied before Executive Coaching materialised, and that whilst Executive Coaching has emerged from these two different focus areas, elements of both a psychological and an organisational development intervention are required in Executive Coaching practice.

2.4.3 *How Executive Coaching functions in the workplace*

Historically Executive Coaching has been applied to improve individual performance, facilitate peak performance and more recently to enhance

behaviour amongst middle and senior management (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Attlee (2013) indicates that in South Africa, performance management and leadership development have been the key drivers for Executive Coaching.

Key defining aspects of Executive Coaching emerging from the literature relate to the highly interpersonal one-on-one nature of workplace coaching interventions which are furthermore characterised by focussing on both organisational and personal issues (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Peterson, 1996). A distinction is made between typical counselling interventions in respect of the relatively short-term duration of Executive Coaching interventions which look to address behavioural issues in the short-term, within the current organisational context of the executive, as opposed to a longer term counselling engagement (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

Various different approaches to Executive Coaching are reported (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo, 2005; Wasylyshyn, 2003; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007), with some common differentiating factors emerging on how it is approached in the workplace. The executive coach is normally engaging with two clients, the executive and the area within the executive's organisation that is sponsoring the coaching process (Stern, 2004; Wasylyshyn, 2003). This requires that Executive Coaching adopts a dual focus, a key differentiator from other similar interventions, as outcomes from the process can improve both organisational and individual executive performance (Stern, 2004).

Executive Coaching is distinct in its use of information from 360 degree feedback mechanisms from the colleagues, peers and/or employees of the executive to enrich the feedback process (Wasylyshyn, 2003). Despite the various insights into the features of Executive Coaching, it is still unclear as to what makes such an intervention effective (Joo, 2005).

2.4.4 *Flow and coaching*

A review of the literature highlights two academic references that link coaching to the concept of flow (Britton, 2008; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007), and several non-academic perspectives that have applied to the relationship between flow and coaching or individual self-help (Cantore & Passmore, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 2015; Kauffman, 2006; Rutkevich, 2015).

A theoretical review of literature on flow and the typical elements of a coaching intervention is provided by Wesson & Boniwell (2007). The outcome of this analysis proposes a flow-enhancing model of coaching within which the characteristics of flow are linked to the key elements within a coaching process. It is suggested this model can be applied to foster flow *during* coaching process and that it can enable the client to identify optimal experiences in their day-to-day lives (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007). Figure 4 illustrates the typical characteristics of flow and the point in the coaching process where each one can be considered.

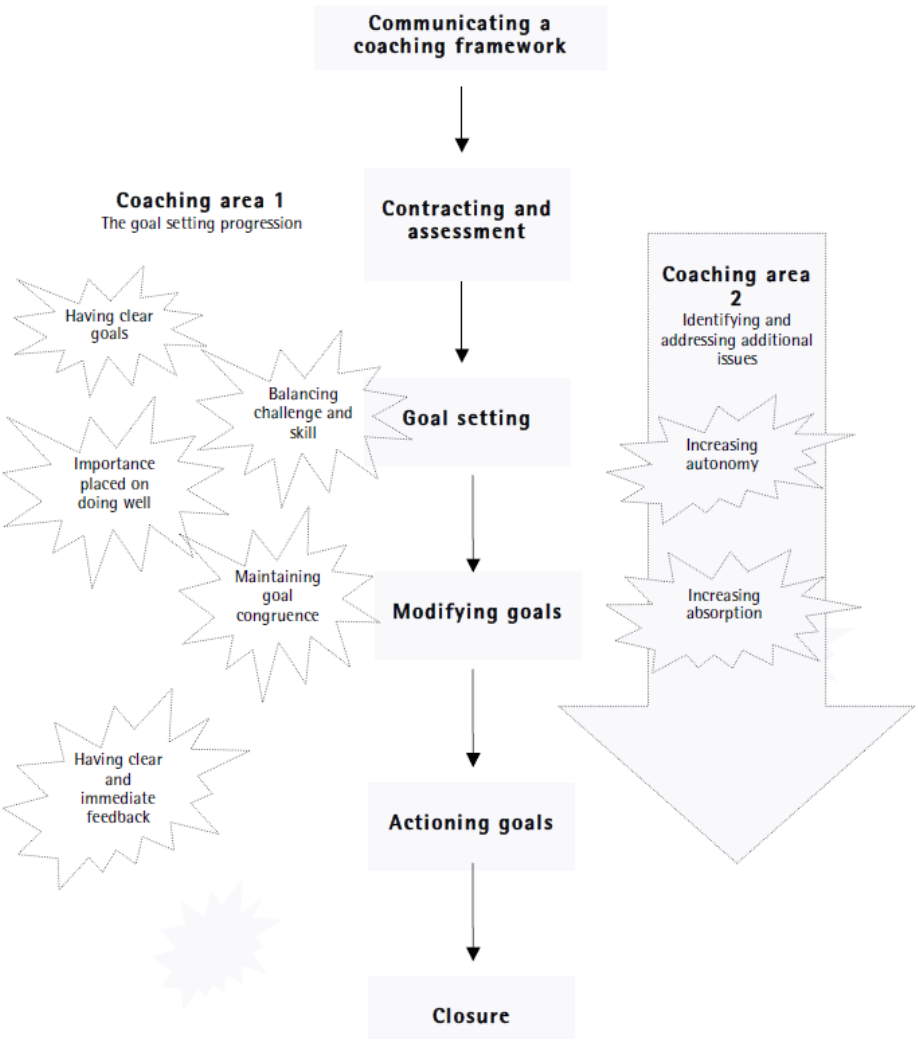


Figure 5. The flow-enhancing model of coaching presented by Wesson & Boniwell (2007) to illustrate how the concepts of flow could apply to the coaching process

The usefulness of this flow-enhancing model of coaching is limited by its lack of empirical evidence, relying on a method that reviews and integrates perspectives of flow and coaching from literature and the authors' personal experiences (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007). Despite being a literature-based review, the article also overlooks additional insights into flow theory available at the time of the publication of the article (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Demerouti, 2006; Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock, & Randall, 2005; Kowal & Fortier,

1999; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Rheinberg, Engeser, & Vollmeyer, 2002; Salanova et al., 2006). Finally, certain considerations in the study, deemed core to the proposed flow-enhancing model are based on factors for which the authors provide no academic reference. The article merely states that “Even though no causal relationships have been established, it is reasonable to assume that developing both autonomy and the capacity for absorption may contribute to experiencing and maintaining flow.” (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007, pp. 34, 36).

A paper by Britton in 2008 focussed on creating an account of how coaching interventions could apply previously validated elements of positive psychology to increase employee engagement and job satisfaction (Britton, 2008). The article is descriptive in nature of how known characteristics of flow, referencing Csikszentmihalyi (Britton, 2008), could be applied to team or employee-supervisor coaching. It records the outcomes from coaching within team settings within a single multi-national company, but there is no consideration of specific coaching implications on executives. The paper adopts a somewhat superficial view of the experience of flow at work, insomuch as it considers only the characteristics outlined in initial descriptors of flow (Britton, 2008). There is no reference or consideration of more in-depth considerations of the flow experience at work, such as in the work conducted by Demerouti (2006) which considers the moderating impact of individual conscientiousness on flow. The article overlooks not only the research that specifically identifies three key distinguishing features of flow at work as absorption, intrinsic motivation, and work enjoyment (Demerouti, 2006; Salanova et al., 2006) but it also does not consider the finding that flow at work is experienced only when absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation all occur at the same time (Demerouti, 2006). Britton refers to finding that “most people have experienced flow and miss it when it is not happening” (Britton, 2008, p. 180), but there is no academic reference nor outline of how this was ascertained. In fact the only reference to academic research, other than Csikszentmihalyi, is to the Wesson and Boniwell (2007) article, within which many limitations for generalisability are outlined above.

Therefore, even though there has been some consideration of flow experiences within the context of coaching, the questions pertaining to the overall implications of flow for the coaching process have not been empirically tested nor linked to the extensive development of the concept of flow within the existing body of knowledge. Finally, the specific impact of flow on executives in the workplace remains unchartered territory.

2.4.5 *General application of coaching to flow*

Several authors have compiled non-academic, conceptual links between the characteristics of flow and coaching. Kauffman (2006) describes the typical conditions for flow and provides readers with illustrations as to how these can be applied to coaching and performance training. A similar approach is taken by Rutkevich (2015) who addresses each characteristic of flow in a research report that includes coaching for flow and peak performances (Rutkevich, 2015). A more direct link to applying the concept of flow to improve employee work engagement is shared by Cantore and Passmore as part of their book on positive psychology and its impacts on the world of business (2012). A less formal link between coaching and flow is offered by Csikszentmihalyi in a recent book to encourage the experience of flow in the daily experience of individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015).

Not one of these works is underpinned by academic, peer reviewed research, each simply offering an interpretation or integration of flow characteristics into a preferred coaching approach or offered as self-help advice. The value offered by these authors however relates to the inherent perspective that there could be an opportunity to use coaching as an intervention to increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences.

2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature review illustrates that there is value in identifying interventions that may facilitate flow experiences in the workplace. Predictors of flow at both the individual level and the organisational level are outlined. Positive outcomes for the individual and the organisation from individual flow experiences at work are reported in the literature (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008; Salanova et al., 2006). It is also illustrated that it is possible for flow experiences to be stimulated in the workplace (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). Typical models underpinning coaching are identified, with specific consideration for Executive Coaching.

Currently there is no insight into the antecedents, experiences, or outcomes of flow for executives in the workplace. Existing academic literature on flow and coaching does not consider the application of coaching to workplace flow experiences for executives, and it hasn't addressed how Executive Coaching in particular may accommodate all the possible causes of flow, ranging from personal characteristics to organisational predictors.

The illustration below provides a conceptual view of the outcome of the literature review.

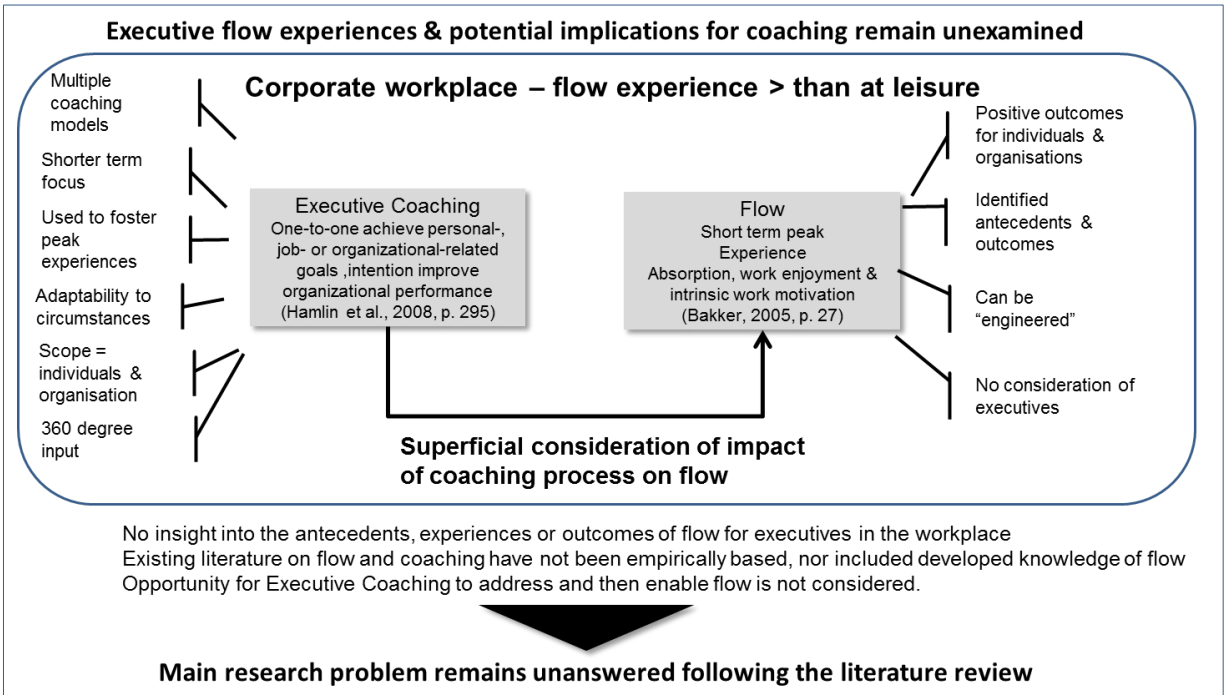


Figure 6. Conceptual illustration to show existing literature on flow and coaching does not address the main research question of this study

The literature review supports the value of resolving the problems proposed for this study, namely, a) how executives experience flow in the workplace; b) how flow experiences can be facilitated in executive workplaces; and c) how Executive Coaching can facilitate creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the selected research methodology and how it aligns to an interpretivist research paradigm across all elements of the study. A qualitative narrative research design best addressed the exploratory requirements of the main research question. The relative advantages and disadvantages of the selected semi-structured interview data collection method applied is subsequently discussed, followed by an outline of the purposive sampling approach. The purpose, nature and content of the research instrument is disclosed, juxtaposed with the formal instruments that have emerged to measure flow in day to day life experiences and in workplaces. An assessment of all the areas of the selected methodology is followed by a conclusion to the chapter that illustrates how the different tools and interventions deployed optimised the validity, reliability, and ethics of the study.

3.1 Research methodology /paradigm

This study was not intended to confirm whether or not executives experience flow in the workplace, as several studies have already established that flow experiences occur within workplaces (Bakker, 2005; Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Colombo, Zito, & Cortese, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). This study rather looked to close the gap identified through the literature review pertaining to executive experiences of flow in the workplace, in order to understand how Executive Coaching can facilitate the creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces. This research study has thus been exploratory in nature.

This exploratory nature, which considers the nascent field of executive flow experiences and the emerging field of Executive Coaching, the subjective nature of topic of the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b, p. 56), and the rich history of research participants' narratives originally used to capture the original essence of flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b) supports the decision to

adopt a qualitative study within an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 238; Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative studies are recognised for enabling exploration and understanding the subjective nature of reality (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) and are commonly associated with the interpretivist research paradigm (Creswell et al., 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). This approach enabled the extraction of life experiences (Creswell et al., 2007), and, in this case, executive flow experiences.

This perspective is aligned to the commentary on flow by M Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1992) which recognises that the origins of flow, its dimensions, causes, and outcomes were identified via qualitative interviews and narratives, typically associated with qualitative research methods. The view from Jackson and Marsh (1995) that, as a phenomenological experience, empirical research of flow states has been difficult to achieve other than through understanding individual experiences via interview methods, provides additional impetus to adopting this research approach. Rubin & Rubin (2011) reinforce this paradigm selection by indicating that quantitative methods are not useful in exploring new areas such as those this study is targeting.

3.2 Research Design

A narrative research design is a form of qualitative research well suited to consider the life experiences of participants, described as an effective approach to “focus on the stories people tell” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 240). The key focus of this study is to build an understanding of the “lived experiences” (Ponterotto, 2005) of executives in experiencing flow at work. A narrative research design is applied due to its ability to give an account of individual experiences such as these.

3.3 Population and sample

3.3.1 *Population*

The population consists of executives working in South African organisations and executive coaches currently in practice in South Africa. The population of executives was employed within organisations that employ more than 500 people. The participants occupied a role that met the definition “An individual who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization at either a middle or senior management level” modified from (Feldman & Lankau, 2005 ; Kilburg, 1996). The coaches were required to be coaching executives using a positive psychology framework due to the strong links between flow and this domain of psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

3.3.2 *Sample and sampling method*

The sample targeted employed individual executives to ensure that it could address executive experiences in workplaces and also coaches currently in practice who were coaching executives and therefore able to share insights into potential implications of flow on coaching practice. The sample was created through a purposive sampling method known to be specifically suited to qualitative studies with the desired objective of developing an enhanced understanding of specific groups or individuals (Devers & Frankel, 1999), in the case of this study, executives and executive coaches in practice. The sample targeted executives across gender, age, race, and industry according to a “most different cases” purposive sampling approach known to support exploratory research (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 298).

One of the key measures to illustrate that the sample size is sufficient to provide as complete an answer to the main question as possible is termed “saturation” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2008, p. 18). The sample size for this study was 16 respondents, 13 executives and three executive coaches. A review

of the new codes added per interview coded in the analysis demonstrated that saturation was achieved, underscoring that the sample size of 13 executives was adequate (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

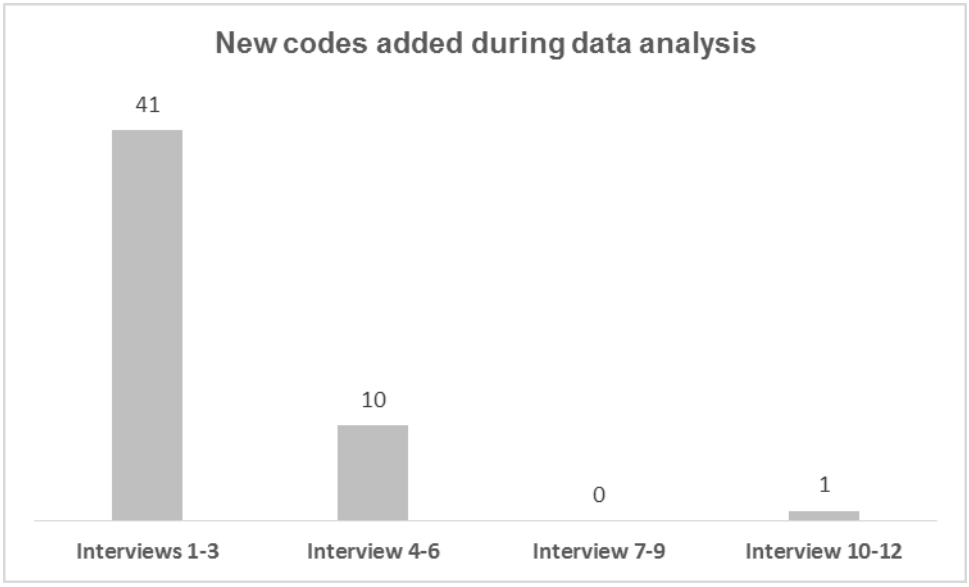


Figure 7. New codes added during data analysis to demonstrate sample saturation

3.4 Procedure for data collection

Face- to- face, semi-structured interviews are used as the core data collection method. This approach has previously been applied to collect rich narrative data on flow experiences, overcoming the challenges typically associated with recording and understanding subjective experiences (Jackson & Marsh, 1996) and is typically associated with gathering information about individual's experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 93) indicate that the semi-structured interview method was used in the collection of original descriptions of flow experiences, and that as a research tool these continue "to be the approach of choice in studies directed toward rich, integrated description". Barriball and While (1994) document that semi-structured interviews are well suited for extracting insights and experiences on complex issues further supporting the suitability of this research method to exploring flow experiences.

The face-to-face interviews with executives took place in their places of work. Only one interview took place in the executive's office as all other executives worked in open plan office layouts. This rendered obsolete the collection of observations of the work context in support of building up a "thick description" (Ponterotto, 2006) pertaining to the work environment in which flow experience took place. It also emerged that all executives described a flow experience from a time other than their current role further eliminating the value of including the current work environment in the observations. Audio recordings were used to ensure accurate recording of the participant responses and the emerging dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Barriball & While, 1994). Participant behaviour, such as facial expressions and general demeanour, were logged in field notes, captured as analytic voice memos (analysis memos in project documents 32, 41 and 42) shortly after the interview was completed.

3.4.1 *Advantages of the semi-structured interview*

Not only are interviews cited as the "tool of choice" when seeking an understanding of personal issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 25), the semi-structured interview typically supports exploratory studies, allowing for probing and open inquiry (Schmidt, 2004), whilst still guiding the dialogue to remain centred around the core topic, in this case, executive flow experiences at work. The face-to-face nature of the interview is intended to assist the research process by facilitating observation of participants within their surroundings, enabling the collection and interpretation of thick descriptions of the participant, their behaviour in the workplace context, and capturing their thoughts and feelings (Ponterotto, 2006).

Interview methods are reported to be well suited to collecting information of a subjective nature (Barriball & While, 1994), where many factors interact (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) as one can reasonably expect when looking at executives in the workplace. It could be expected that the researcher may need to probe further on certain responses to uncover accurate descriptions of flow, a process well

supported by semi-structured interviews (Barriball & While, 1994). This probing, together with other interactions within the interview, is expected to overcome social desirability bias as the interview relationship should dispel the need for respondents to pursue responses that position them favourably to the interviewer (Barriball & While, 1994).

3.4.2 *Disadvantages of semi-structured interview research methods*

The known challenge of recall bias in interview research methods where the quality of the response relies on the respondent's ability to and interest in answering as accurately as possible (Bhattacherjee, 2012) was one of the disadvantages of applying this method to this study. Nielsen and Cleal (2010) opted not to use the interview method in their study on flow due to this limitation of the interview method, and the fact that it requires the individual to combine experiences over time in order to build a singular picture of their flow experiences. The alternative method of the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) applied by (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) overcomes both these limitations to effectively capture the transitory nature of a flow state. However, in this study it was not suitable to use the ESM, because of the difficulty of aligning this mechanism of data collection with the daily schedules of the executives. The ESM is also limited in that it disrupts flow experiences. This may impact the ability to extract descriptors of the state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

The semi-structured interview requires the respondent to make a couple of hours available for participation in the study, typically a potential drawback of using this method of data collection (Devers & Frankel, 1999). This limitation did not impact the outcome of this study. It is possible that the researcher's lack of experience and formalised skills as an interviewer may have influenced the outcome of the study, as it is known that, as with any interpretivist study, the researcher and the researcher's skills impact the interview process and thus possible outcomes (Barriball & While, 1994 ; Bhattacherjee, 2012).

Another disadvantage of the semi-structured interview is that, although it is effective in exploring subjective experiences and unearthing fresh information on individual experiences, replication and generalisability are difficult to achieve. This would potentially impact the overall quality of the outcomes of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

3.5 The research instrument

Whilst the original dimensions and definitions of the structure of flow were initially established through qualitative interviews, the occurrence of flow across different environments, situations or people has also been measured through several flow-related questionnaires, within quantitative or mixed methods studies (Allison & Duncan, 1987; Bakker, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Jackson & Marsh, 1996).

Initially, it was felt that the subjective and episodic nature of the flow experience confounded measurement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). However, later studies established valid tools for measuring flow (Bakker, 2008; Rheinberg et al., 2002). Wright et al. (2007) have also commented on the difficulty in comparing the outcomes of different studies due to the fact they have measured different components of flow.

Table 2 – Instruments Developed To Measure Flow

Measure Of Flow	Description	Application	Reference
Flow scale	Measures the frequency with which individual participants experience 10 dimensions of flow.	Applied to consider flow experiences across different activities and to	M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (1992); Mayers (1978)

Measure Of Flow	Description	Application	Reference
		identify how flow dimensions are experienced.	
Experience Questionnaire	Instrument developed to extract narrative descriptions of peak performance; peak experience; flow; an average event; misery; failure.	Extracts narrative descriptions of experiences. Only considers flow in respect of sport.	Privette & Bundrick (1987)
Flow questionnaire – Flow Q	Three passages from the original descriptors of flow from a dancer, composer and a rock climber are reviewed by participants to establish if they have had flow experiences. If so, the frequency of such experiences is measured and in what activity contexts these occur.	Measures the frequency of flow.	M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (1992)
Enhanced flow questionnaire	Includes measures to assess boredom, apathy and degree of anxiety, added to the Flow questionnaire.	Intended to measure anti-flow.	Allison & Duncan (1987)
Flow state scale	Nine scales that represent the key elements of flow.	To measure flow experiences in	Jackson & Marsh (1996)

Measure Of Flow	Description	Application	Reference
		sport and physical activity.	
Experience sampling method	Participants complete a short questionnaire at random points during the day when they receive signals from some type of electronic device over a pre-set period of time.	Structured method for gathering information on subjective experiences of participants at random points within a specified time period.	Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre (1989); Jackson & Marsh (1996)
Work-related Flow inventory (Wolf)	Assesses the extent that absorption, intrinsic motivation and work enjoyment are experienced at work.	Measures flow at work	Bakker (2008)

Not one of these tools was deemed appropriate to address the research question. The Flow Questionnaire, Flow Scale, Flow State Scale (FSS) and the Work-related Flow Inventory presuppose that existing descriptors of flow are applicable and thus do not enable the extraction of executive flow descriptions required to address the main research questions of this study. The Experience Questionnaire was designed to measure flow experiences in sport; its efficacy in the work environment is untested, rendering it ineffective for this study. The Enhanced Flow Questionnaire is intended for use in identifying anti-flow experiences, a different focus to this study's objective. It seemed that the most relevant instrument for this research study would have been the Experience Sampling Method, which looks to identify subjective experiences, but the problem

with this approach was its intrusive nature, and the known weakness of interrupting a flow experience as it occurs.

This study has however identified that the description used in the Wolf for a flow experience could be used at the end of the interviews to verify that the respondents had been describing the correct experience. To this end this study includes an extract from the Wolf, as a closing item for discussion.

Two separate interview schedules, presented in Appendices 1 and 2, were used in the study, one to interview executives and another for executive coaches. Both instruments were open ended in nature, starting with an introductory section outlining the purpose of the research, addressing ethical issues pertaining to consent and confidentiality, and obtaining background information from respondents. Both initial sections intended to settle the respondent into the interview process.

Iterative changes were made to the interview schedules to accommodate outcomes from the pilot interviews, and the manner in which respondents reacted to the initial schedule. Although the pilot respondents indicated that they found the process to be clear and easy to follow, some changes to the schedule were made. The executive interview was adapted to leave out the questions pertaining to what makes the flow experience start and stop, and the request of where the executives were in the organisational context at that time (Discussion Guide V1: Executive flow experiences at work, Point 2). This change was informed by the spontaneous and complete nature of the responses received to the initial question at Point 2, rendering these questions of less value.

The executive coach interviews tended to be far less aligned to the initial Discussion Guide as the coaches indicated an understanding of flow. It was however necessary to clarify that the study was not considering flow within the coaching process, but rather that it was considering the experiences of flow by executives at work. The process was modified to explore the typical reasons why executives had initiated coaching, the typical tools that the executive coaches were using, and then exploring the insights that the coaches had on the topic of

work enjoyment for executives. Only the latter modification extracted data useful to the research question. The coaches were asked to share how they would support an executive in achieving flow and work enjoyment.

The request for participation included the possibility of follow-up questions post the interview process, but none were found necessary.

3.5.1 *Interview schedule for coaches*

The purpose of interviewing coaches was to add credibility and alternate perspectives to the study outcomes by building triangulated data, and sourcing perspectives on executive flow from multiple respondent types (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The second section of the instrument provided several definitions of flow, drawing on the literature review on the theory of flow, and an outline of the typical dimensions of workplace flow experiences. This definitional section was intended to equip the coaches with sufficient understanding of flow from which to address the schedule items that explored the coaches' views of executive flow experiences at work.

The next two items on the schedule considered the views of the participant coaches on the possible relationship between Executive Coaching and flow to provide input to directly inform an understanding of the implications of executive flow experiences for Executive Coaching. These looked into possible links between coaching and flow, and fostering workplace flow experiences through coaching. The interview was concluded with an extract from a narrative of flow from Bakker's (2008) research to validate the Wolf Inventory. This extract was used to provide a description of flow for coaches to consider and establish how they felt the stages in their typical coaching process could foster similar experiences for their coachees.

3.5.2 *Interview schedule for executives*

A critical objective of this schedule is to extract descriptions of executive workplace flow experiences without introducing a bias to the descriptions. It was felt that this would be possible if executive respondents were introduced to the known dimensions of flow beforehand. The objective was to extract spontaneous descriptions of flow experiences. To this end the researcher considered various documented dimensions of flow experiences, precursors, and outcomes; derived some key questions that consolidated these dimensions into a few generic descriptors; and included these into Section 2 of the executive interview schedule to guide the respondents in sharing their experiences of this nature.

A discussion of anti-flow experiences was introduced in Section 3 of the schedule, adopting the tradition used by Allison & Duncan (1987), updated in M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (1992), to explore anti-flow experiences to better delineate the dimensions of flow experiences for women at work. The schedule built on this topic to assess how the executive may proactively pursue flow at work. This was intended to inform in what type of interventions coaching may foster flow. The interview concluded with an introduction to flow, providing the same narrative description of a flow experience that was shared with executive coaches, with the intention of allowing the executive respondent to consider the similarities between their descriptors and this narrative.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

The main objective of the study was to understand the implications of the subjective flow experiences of executives for the practice of Executive Coaching. Inductive content analysis is understood to provide the best approach to build an understanding from collected data (Basit, 2003), and was thus the data analysis approach employed in this study. The unit of analysis (Bhattacherjee, 2012) was the individual executive or executive coach. The data collected included audio

files of the interviews, field notes recorded after the interviews to capture contextual information; and transcripts made from the audio files.

The starting point was to code the data to identify the codes, categories, and themes emerging from the data, thus providing insights into the common themes and concepts referred to by Rubin and Rubin (2011). Consistent with an inductive data analysis process, no codes were predetermined by the researcher. All data codes were generated from the data itself, reflecting the "words and phrases used by informants themselves" (Basit, 2003, p. 144). The researcher used the analytical tool, ATLAS.ti.7, to automate the coding process, supporting the efficient organisation, searching, sorting and processing of the data (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Once all the codes had been identified in the data, these were grouped into categories to assist in drawing out emerging themes of the executive flow experiences across respondents (Saldana, 2009).

The categories pulled together codes reflecting similar elements of the antecedents, characteristics, and outcomes of respondent flow experiences (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The researcher then assessed which categories were related, resulting in themes emerging (Saldana, 2009).The content of field notes was included in the analysis to ensure alignment with the emerging themes. These themes provided insight into the similarities and differences between the flow experiences shared by respondents. The directional relationships between themes assisted in assessing commonalities across respondents in respect of the antecedents and outcomes of flow experiences, assisting the researcher in addressing the main research problem, and devising a model on the implications for Executive Coaching of executive flow experiences.

3.7 Limitations of the study

The study was affected by the limitations typically applicable to qualitative research methods, and by more specific limitations previously identified in studies considering flow experiences.

3.7.1 *Limitations applicable to qualitative research and implications on this study*

The interpretivist research paradigm applied in this study holds as a central tenet the criticality of the communication between the researcher and the respondent, holding that the two parties actually jointly create the findings (Ponterotto, 2005). It is thus possible that the personal attributes and perceptions of the researcher had an impact on the outcome of the study, a possibility documented by Creswell et al (2007). The fact that all participants personally knew the researcher may have exacerbated this possibility. This may prevent an ease of replication and generalisability of the study, both desirable characteristics of scientific knowledge building (Bhattacherjee, 2012), and thereby challenge the possibility of an objective outcome.

The qualitative nature of the study restricted internal validity, or causality, one of the key attributes of research design (Bhattacherjee, 2012). This limitation meant that the study was not able to determine exact antecedents of flow experiences, as the qualitative method does not support the manipulation of possible causes or outcomes of experiences.

The application of a purposive sampling for this study enabled it to delimit the study to executives and Executive Coaches, both being groups that could attest to the executive flow experiences that this study aimed to explore, but there was no way of sampling to ensure that the individuals had actually experienced flow and were able to describe same without introducing a bias into the possible descriptions elicited. It was thus not possible to sample for typical cases of executives that had experienced flow at work, extreme cases of anti-flow, or flow or the exceptions to the rule. These three typical sampling cases were referenced as three approaches to purposive sampling that offered the best outcome of this approach (Devers & Frankel, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.7.2 *Specific limitations previously identified in studies of flow experiences*

Despite the suitability of the qualitative research method for building an understanding of flow, this method relies on retrospective analysis of flow experiences by participants, introducing the likelihood of recall bias to the study (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). These authors further document that the respondents are required to build an image of their positive subjective experiences over time to best describe a consolidated view of their flow experience, exacerbating the aforementioned recall bias. The subjective experience of flow lends itself to the emergence of non-responsiveness bias in the study (Barriball & While, 1994) where participants may not actually feel sufficiently knowledgeable about the topic to respond, or that they may provide formulaic responses. Finally, Jackson & Marsh (1996) emphasise that the typical challenge in documenting phenomenological experiences such as flow has impacted the ability of flow research to keep abreast of flow experiences.

3.8 Validity and reliability

Barriball and While (1994) describe how a credible study outcome is typically assessed by the degree to which the study measures that which it intends to measure, referred to as validity, and the degree to which the results are repeatable, described as reliability (Bhattacherjee, 2012). This study deployed certain tools identified by several research methodology authors, outlined in this section below, to maximise the likelihood of valid, reliable, and unbiased outcomes (Barriball & While, 1994; Bhattacherjee, 2012; Guest et al., 2006; Maxwell, 1992; Morse et al., 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Morse et al. (2008) outline various strategies to strive for verification of deployed study methods. This study aimed to address all these areas, commencing by striving for methodological coherence (Morse et al., 2008) between the research method and the main research problem, illustrated in Figure 8.

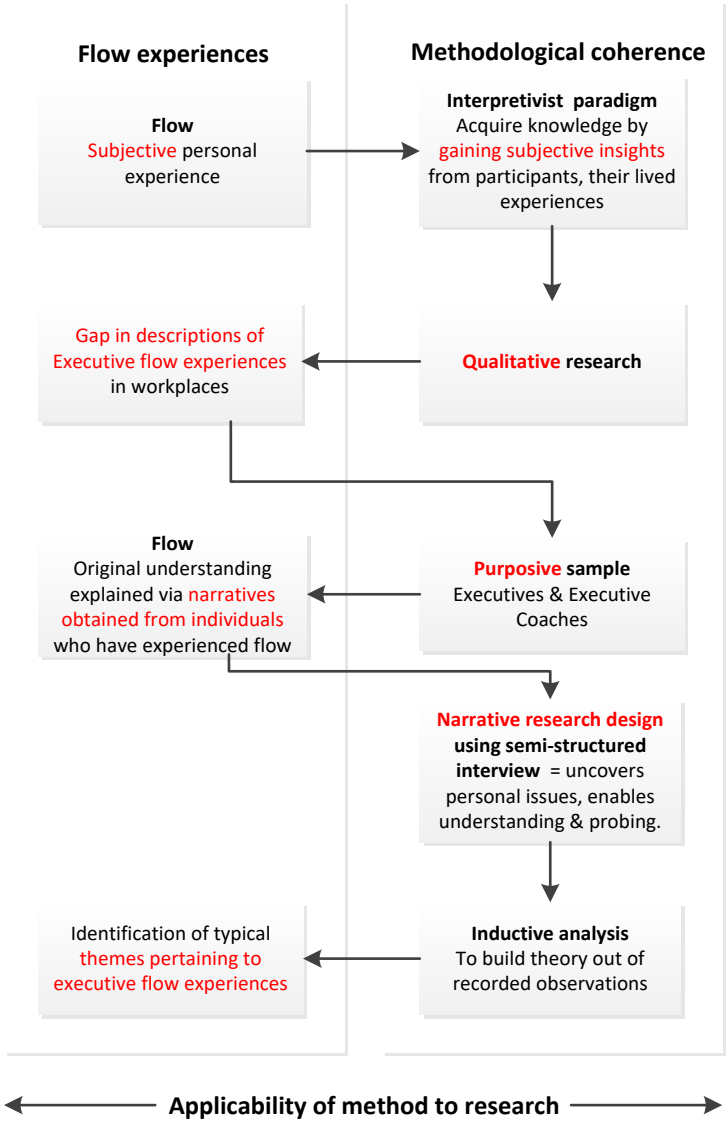


Figure 8. Approach taken to facilitate methodological coherence within the study

The purposive sample used addresses Morse et al's (2008) second verification requirement, that of an appropriate sample. Selecting executives and executive coaches ensured a sample of individuals best positioned to share insights into executive flow experiences. The sample was also designed for maximum variation, a tool to improve validity by selecting executives that represented key demographic variables; namely, race, age, gender; and organisation.

Morse et al. (2008) emphasised the importance of an adequate sample size, represented by saturation, to support data verification. The sample size for this

study was 16 respondents, 12 executives and 4 executive coaches, supporting saturation as demonstrated in Figure 7.

The researcher's iterative modification of the interview instruments during the research process of the proposal supported the concurrent collection and analysis of data in support of reliability and validity as espoused by Morse et al. (2008), whilst also facilitating the process of confirming emerging concepts from completed interviews in forthcoming interviews (Morse et al., 2008).

Finally, the researcher was guided by the suggestion of working towards theory development in a manner supportive of validity and reliability (Morse et al., 2008) by constantly considering the implications of the themes on executive flow that emerged from the interview data with the possible theoretical framework evolving from the data.

Maxwell (1992, pp. 284-285) identified five different types of validity that apply to qualitative research, namely, descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalisability, and evaluative validity. This study deployed methods to address the first four of these, as shown in the table below.

Table 3 - Addressing Maxwell's (1992) Validity Criteria In The Study

Type of Validity	Description	Method to Address Within This Study
Descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992)	Represents the degree of factual accuracy of the study.	Audio recordings of the interviews to ensure accurate recording of the participant responses (Barriball & While, 1994). Transcripts of the audio recordings used in the data coding process.

Type of Validity	Description	Method to Address Within This Study
Interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992)	Confirms that the study is grounded in the language used by participants.	Audio recordings enabled the researcher to reflect on the language and terminology of the respondent (Barriball & While, 1994). Inductive analysis through which all data codes reflected the “words and phrases used by informants themselves” (Basit, 2003, p. 144)
Theoretical validity (Maxwell, 1992)	Ensures that the theory fits the data.	Peer review of the outcome of the inductive analysis to be pursued.
Generalisability (Maxwell, 1992)	Confirmation that the study outcomes may be generalisable beyond the scope of the study.	Purposive sampling to capture flow experiences of executives and executive coaches who are best positioned to share insights into executive flow experiences. Respondent triangulation through inclusion of executive coaches in the sample.

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain an understanding of executive flow experiences at work; it was not looking to identify causality between different factors, where internal validity is more typically applicable. For this reason, and

the fact that studies similar to this one are not usually able to manipulate variables to demonstrate causality (Bhattacherjee, 2012), there are no internal validity tools applied to this study.

Assessing the external validity in this study would involve considering the degree to which the study findings were generalisable to a general population of executives. In qualitative research, it would also involve considering whether or not the findings had been interpreted correctly. The study was designed to extract thick descriptions (Ponterotto, 2006) from the interviews pertaining to the broader context of the executive in the workplace. This was done by compiling detailed field notes post the interview to capture any other observations that would assist in drawing out rich behavioural and other data. This approach confirmed that the study did measure what it should: an understanding of executive flow experiences in the workplace.

The final item on both the executive coach and the executive research instrument was an extract of a narrative description of a flow experience, lending itself to a shared understanding across respondents of the experience of flow. This facilitated an equivalence of understanding of the meaning of flow, an approach known to support validity in semi-structured interviews (Barriball & While, 1994).

As mentioned previously, the researcher was aware of the documented impact of the researcher in similar studies on the outcome of the study (Bhattacherjee, 2012). To this end the researcher conducted a pilot study with work colleagues using the proposed instruments. Through this the researcher tested the degree to which the instrument was able to extract flow experiences, the impact that the researcher had on the respondent, and gathered any other feedback for areas of improvement.

3.8.1 *Reliability*

Reliable study outcomes enable comparability between studies by adopting methods that improve the likelihood that different researchers are able to make

the same observations using the same methods deployed in this study (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The study deployed a common data collection method of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews across all respondents to support a repeatable outcome (Barriball & While, 1994). The use of a semi-structured interview has been shown to assist in sequencing the questions to ensure working through the same thought process in dialogue, in turn supporting a reliable study outcome (Barriball & While, 1994). Finally, the use of audio recordings to gather data and the use of analytic memos to capture field observations have been used to identify any areas where further probing was needed for emerging themes, an approach expected to facilitate reliability (Barriball & While, 1994) as the researcher is able to delve into unclear responses. The capturing of field notes during the research process supported ongoing data analysis, investigator responsiveness, and clearly demonstrated every step of the process. This supported verification and replicability of the study (Devers & Frankel, 1999).

3.9 Managing ethics within the study

The study adopted some specific interventions to address each of the typical considerations (Bhattacherjee, 2012) to ensure an ethical outcome. All respondents were advised from the outset that their participation was voluntary. Each respondent completed and signed a consent form prior to the interviews being conducted. During the interviews the researcher clearly stipulated that the interview was being recorded.

Respondents were not anonymous to the researcher, but the study retained their confidentiality within the data collected, including recordings and field notes, as well as within final publication where their identity was protected by being made anonymous in the reporting. Respondents were sent copies of the final research report.

3.10 Conclusion to research methodology

This chapter outlined the research methodology deemed appropriate and deployed to address the exploratory nature of the study. The basic elements of each component within the research process were linked to the aims and requirements of the study, concluding with an outline of how the study intended to achieve a credible outcome that could add to the current body of knowledge on flow.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines a summary of the categories emerging out of the analysis of the interview responses. Overall the data analysis uncovered 77 codes, sorted into 11 code families. The findings are presented by category emerging from the qualitative data analysis process.

4.1.1 *Interview questions*

The study deployed two different sets of interview questions, one aimed at the executives, and the other at the executive coaches. The executive interview followed the schedule provided in Appendix A, and the executive coach interviews that included in Appendix B. Both schedules were initially tested in pilot interviews to assess the degree to which they elicited the required responses to address the key research questions. Minor modifications were made to the executive coach interview schedule, and one question was excluded from the executive interviews as it was found to be repetitive. The sub-questions pertaining to what makes the feeling start and stop were excluded because the respondents' answers to the initial question listed in Appendix A, point 2, first bullet tended to address the additional sub-questions.

4.1.2 *Respondent demographics*

The study targeted thirteen executives, spanning multiple organisations and industries, in order to meet the desired purposive sampling targeted in the research methodology. All executives are in organisations with more than one thousand employees, with a mix of local and global presence across the respondent pool organisations, and each holds a position that forms part of at least a large division's executive management committee. The respondents had a minimum age of thirty-five to forty-five years. An equal number of men and

women were interviewed. The interviews were all conducted within the executive's workplace, though not necessarily in their own offices or office space. Executive coaches were interviewed either at their offices or an alternate convenient location.

Table 4 - Respondent Demographics

	Gender	Age	Role	Industry
1	Male	35 – 40	Country M.D	Digital Marketing
2	Female	40-45	Executive Head	Telecoms
3	Female	40- 45	Executive	Financial Services, Banking
4	Male	45 – 50	Managing Director	Telecoms
5	Male	40- 45	Managing Executive	Telecoms
6	Female	35 – 40	Executive Head	Telecoms
7	Male	40 – 45	Managing Director	Financial Services, Insurance
8	Female	40 -45	Chief Marketing Officer	FMCG
9	Male	40 -45	Marketing Executive	Telecoms

	Gender	Age	Role	Industry
10	Female	40 – 45	Marketing Executive	Financial services, Insurance
11	Male	35 – 40	Managing Director	Professional Services
12	Female	35 – 40	Divisional Executive	Financial Services, Banking
13	Male	45 – 50	Managing Executive	Financial Services, Banking
14	Female	45 – 50	Executive Coach	Independent coach
15	Male	45 – 50	Executive Coach	Professional Services
16	Female	40- 45	Executive coach	Independent coach

4.2 Description of flow experience

The central question in the interviews asked respondents to “Describe an experience at work where you felt completely absorbed in what you were doing, losing track of time, and loving the feeling of what you were doing. An experience that you would love to have again”. Whilst there were several probing questions that followed this request, the respondents tended to address all questions in their description of flow.

4.2.1 *Description of flow experience – positive state of mind*

A flow experience was portrayed as a powerful experience, where the individual is attentive to the moment. A feeling of being invested in the experience was described. This positive state of mind is reinforced by the response from one of the executive coaches who linked the flow experience to purpose as follows: “when people experience that sense of flow in the world of the executive, what happens is, they start tapping into purpose and that’s amazingly powerful and life changing for them, ya” (Participant 15, Line 164).

4.2.2 *Description of flow experience – positive emotions*

Some of the executive respondents provided a rich narrative description of the positive emotions felt during a flow experience, making these palpable. It is described as a “sense of euphoria” (Participant 2, Line 57); “uplifting, encouraging and motivating” (Participant 14, Line 155). The following comparison was shared by one of the executives: “Like when you’re in love, the early stages of being in love” (Participant 11, Line 221).

4.2.3 *Energy experienced during flow activity*

Flow activities were described as injecting energy into the individual, ranging from energy at an almost visceral level, “it fed me” (Participant 7, Line 54) to a rush of adrenalin keeping the individual alert: “the feeling I get in these places, I think we’re almost running on adrenalin sometimes because we’re just watching and waiting and anticipating” (Participant 2, Line 32).

Participant 2 shared that the experience of energy is not limited, but rather a “constant flow of energy” (Line 38). The positive outcome of this energy was portrayed by one of the executive coaches as “they have the energy you know and the sass to walk around like that” (Participant 16, Line 115).

4.2.4 *Engrossed in flow activity*

Flow activities are labelled as all encompassing, a strong sentiment that occurred in twenty-seven quotes. This characteristic of the executive flow experience comes across as enduring, with an almost magical quality emerging in the descriptions, as is seen in the following: “You‘re sleeping it, you dream about it, you think about it, it's just there” (Participant 11, Line 220) and “It felt almost like you are in a bubble” (Participant 7, Line 144).

Individual descriptors include feelings of absorption, immersion to a point of losing perspective of the self and the world around them. Participant 14 indicated that “it's how you feel about that, that helps you kind of like forget about yourself and then want to do it again” (Line 18), and Participant 12 said “I think there’s a point where you say, nothing else around you, you know, it's like you’ve closed the world out, and for me it feels like that. You’re in your zone, you know, you’re doing this and comfortably so” *(*Line 122).

4.2.5 *Executives can seek out flow*

A definite view emerged that flow can be proactively sought. This was supported by Participant 7 stating that “the choice is yours, right*”* (Line 116). This respondent shared how he or she overcame boredom at work by pursuing a challenge outside work. Another executive found something more *“*concrete to do*”* (Participant 9, Line 144). It is re-emphasised that the feeling of flow is not limited to any specific role that the individual may do, but that people need to seek it out (Participant 3, Line 131).

One of the executive coaches suggested that flow experiences can be discovered by focusing on specific elements of experience in any given day to affirm those that support flow.

> Looking in their day, when is it that your time disappears? When is it that you feel energised, because energy is a big thing with the flow. So they

> start really looking at that throughout the day and recording those times for themselves, then they start realising that they can have more of that and that it is a conscious decision to make to have more of it. (Participant 15, Line 53).

Specific examples where executives shared what they have done to get to flow, ranged from taking up running, to doing different work, or focusing on energy management with a coach (Participant 15) and looking at “things that energise me from a personal space” (Participant 13, Line 43) .

4.2.6 *Feedback on outcome not immediate*

The feedback on the outcome of the flow activity is typically not received immediately during the activity. This code is associated with 52 quotes, with the responses typically reflecting three broad forms of feedback: business performance measures, project tracking and from colleagues. Certain executives indicated that they do not obtain feedback at all.

Feedback through specific business performance measures

Executives received feedback through tracking the key performance indicators of their business, illustrated by Participants 1 and 14 who monitor sales numbers (Line 39; Line 84). For Participant 14 “part of the flow is experienced in the turnaround of performance” (Lines 71-73). This has been recognized for other executives in the form of either consumer feedback (Participant 3, Line 56) or winning industry awards (Participant 7, Line 60).

Feedback through project tracking

Some respondents received feedback on progress through meeting milestones when managing against a plan. This is evidenced in the response from Participant 3 that “planning and tracking plans” is the way in which feedback is obtained (Line 58).

Feedback from colleagues

Another form of feedback was through engaging with colleagues to obtain their views: “You know, lots of informal chats” (Participant 13, Line 57).

No feedback

Some respondents indicated that they did not always receive feedback to detect if they were on track or not. Participant 13 also indicated that they “don’t always know” (Line 55). Participant 14 shared that “You don’t, right? You’ve got to believe in the method and trust the process.” (Line 93).

4.2.7 *Feeling challenged by flow activity*

The experience of feeling challenged by the flow activity is a strong theme emerging from the data, recurring in 43 quotes. Generally the quotes illustrated that challenge was something through which “people are being stretched with the work that they’re doing” (Participant 14, Line 70), or pushed out of their comfort zone (Participant 11, Line 261).

The nature of the challenge described by the respondents arose from multiple sources, varying between challenge experienced through the complexity of the task, the high impact of the outcome of the task on the business, challenge due to the possibility of dire implications if something went wrong in its execution, to self-imposed challenge. Some executives referred to taking on a challenge in cases where colleagues doubted the possibility of success in a particular outcome.

Challenge is a positive experience

Challenge appears to be a positive experience for executives. Participant 7 stated that “being in flow is not doing easy things, well for me anyway, I like a challenge” (Line 76) and another respondent shared that “It's a heart attack on a plate, but

I've never been so excited, I've never been so energised*”* (Participant 13, Line 186).

Challenge through perception of dire consequence of failure

The experience of challenge through the perceived dire consequences if the executive fails to deliver is well articulated by Participant 6 who explained that the *“*impact like the dichotomy of like a massive challenge for me which was like driving and stuff, but also this fear that oh my […] I could screw this up incredibly badly (laughter*)” (*Line 46). A different but related challenge was illustrated by Participant 6, who shared that she felt nervous for the magnitude of financial investment they required in their flow activity “Ya, look I was nervous, I don’t want to lie,[..], and every morning I’d wake up and say, please can I not screw this up (laughter). So I was incredibly nervous, on both examples” (Line 94).

Self-imposed challenge

Challenge is sometimes specifically created by the executive. Participant 6 shared that “setting that audacious goal, and I mean I've set goals that we don’t even achieve, but it's that setting that I love” (Line 58) and Participant 12 said:

> My team knows, my favourite word is, are we giving it another notch up, is it a notch up from what we did last year? Because if it's not then I might as well go because you can always do what you did last year, and do it perfectly. So if we’re not improving anything, if we’re not adding one notch up, then what are we doing*?* (Line 91).

This theme of self-imposed challenge was further supported by one of the executives who sought out a challenge by taking up running when their work wasn’t sufficiently challenging (Participant 7, Line 108).

Taking up a challenge posed by colleagues doubting success

The challenge can come about through a desire to show colleagues that success is possible against difficult odds, as shared by Participant 13: *“*the happiest I am

is when people tell me, I can't do it, and it's the wrong thing and when I know it's right, proving it, and then ya, that's when I work my best*"* (Line 33), and illustrated differently by Participant 7 who shared that she rose to the challenge that *"*guys from the sales teams were like, I want to watch you fail*"* (Line 74).

4.2.8 *Flow activity feels effortless*

Certain of the respondents referred to experiencing the activity they were performing when in flow as easy, comfortable to do, effortless, using descriptions that sounded almost like intuitive actions where things were happening naturally. "The experience is smooth and filled with motion, but overall with little or no effort "(Participant 13, Line 145).

This was described as happening with so little effort that one of the executives stated that they didn't even know how that work "came out*"* of them (Participant 13, Line 145).

One executive noted that the ease of working was supplemented by a serendipitous experience of everything around them coming together to support the activity. This was described as "some of the universe conspires with you as well because all of a sudden articles on that subject are easier to find, or people on that subject are easy to find*"* (Participant 11, Line 221).

The effortless quality of the experience was further illustrated by a perspective from Participant 9 that despite working long hours, there was a lack of tiring, implying an effortlessness in doing the work "you give and you do work the hours but you don't get tired" (Line 197).

4.2.9 *Flow activity – lost track of time*

This element of the flow experience was the easiest for any respondent to identify with a flow experience. The variation on the experience of time is illustrated in the different descriptions provided by executives.

This clear loss of time is explained through an actual loss of time on a clock to a more abstract sense of time not being important while doing this activity. Participant 14 described a clock-based experience, *"*and we were brain storming lots and by the time you're sitting there it's 11 pm and you're like, oh *[…]" (*Line 185).

A general lack of importance of time whilst performing the flow activity is indicated in "but I feel the amount of time my team and I put in, it didn't matter that you actually have a 9 to 5 job, it didn't actually matter" (Participant 6, Line 51).

Contrarily, one of the executives depicted a loss of time by describing a willingness to give up their own personal time at any time of day due to their enjoyment of the activity performed during their flow experience, stating that "and I would give up my personal time because I was committed to the outcome I had to deliver" (Participant 10, Line 54). Aligned with this sentiment, another executive described their willingness to lose time to their work during the flow experience, another form of losing track of time "but Monday to Friday afternoon, if I have to wake up at 4 in the morning and get stuff done I'll do it" (Participant 12, Line 114). An account of the experience of time during flow which portrays a distortion of time rather than a direct loss of track of time was provided by Participant 4, who explained this as "I think speed, I think everything's faster, it's brighter on the one side" (Line 93).

One of the executive coaches participating in the study provided confirmation of this basic descriptor of flow, losing track of time, as an experience with which executives are able to identify **(**Participant 15, Line 50).

4.2.10 *Flow experience is enjoyable*

The flow experience was portrayed as highly enjoyable on a physical and on an abstract level. Physical pleasure was expressed as "feeling goosebumps when thinking of it" (Participant 7, Line 36), "tingling and experiencing butterflies" (Participant 6, Line 47).

It was felt as happiness, euphoria and an absolute high in the abstract level by Participants 2 and 11. The feeling of flow was described as transforming the experience from feeling like work, an occurrence that executives described as wanting to continue, as if it were “something special to be treasured” (Participant 11, Line 220).

4.2.11 *Flow experience over an extended period of time*

Overall, executives tended to refer to a period in their career where they felt flow, rather than to a single point in time. As Participant 9 said: “So when you asked me I think a period in a life, or a period in your career*”* (Line 211).

One executive indicated that they had experienced flow for four years (Participant 7, Line 31), referring to a feeling of being continually focussed. A second respondent felt so strongly that their experience was not limited to a single point in time that they initially indicated that they were unable to “pinpoint an exact experience but a kind of time” (Participant 9, Line 30), and then in responding to the verbatim description of flow from the academic literature later in the interviews, re-emphasised that “I'm talking about like a longer moment of time.. ……It was quite sustained over quite a long time. Whereas I think for me that those flow times are quite chunky*”* (Participant 9, Lines 195; 205).

Whilst for other respondents it was not quite as long, it was still an extended period such as for the duration of a project (Participant 2, Line 32) or for large portions of a week (Participant 8, Line 127).

4.2.12 *Flow is a personal feeling*

The distinguishing attribute that emerged from the three quotes related to this code is that the experience of flow is distinct to each individual. The executives referred to the fact that, not only was it a personal feeling (Participant 7, Line 121), but it was also *“*different things for different people*”* (Participant 1, Line 110).

4.2.13 *Frequency of flow varies across executives*

Eleven executive respondents shared the frequency of their flow experience at work even though there was no direct question on this aspect of flow. The responses cover a range, from flow not having been experienced at all in their current role, being elusive, seldom experienced, often to daily for others.

Table 5 - Frequency Of Flow

Frequency Of Flow	Supporting Quote
No flow in current job	"I haven't found that here yet, it's elusive here" (Participant 11, Line 59)
Frequency of flow reducing since role became more of a leadership role rather than a "doing role"	" I think the more senior you get the more you can manage and lead and the less you do, and the less kind of exhilaration there is to be honest with you" (Participant 4, Line 32)
Often experiencing flow	"there's lots (laughter)" (Participant 13, Line 30)
Daily experience	"I think I experience them almost every day." (Participant 9, Line 241)

4.2.14 *Verbatim description of flow resonates*

The interview for both the executives and the executive coaches ended with a verbatim description of the original flow experience in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975a) work. This was intended to confirm the detail of the responses elicited earlier from the executives on their flow experiences. By far the majority of respondents felt that this extract reflected their experience.

This category reflected 14 quotes that supported this outcome. Many respondents had used some of the terminology in their initial response, providing strong support that the study was measuring that which it intended, for example:

> Ya, a lot of the words that I listened to sort of position the sentence in the extreme, extreme pleasure, extreme involvement and my answer to that would be is, that is sort of the nirvana of flow. And some of the sub text in there I can say, ya, that resonates with me in the moment of something that I've described to you."(Participant 3, Line 122).

Executives indicated a 100 percent fit between their experience and earlier description of flow, or felt that it resonated or it reflected or their experience *"*to a tee*"* (Participant 15, Line 101); and *"*I think it's a hundred percent correlation I would say*"* (Participant 10, Line 90), as well as "I think it's completely congruent with what I felt earlier." (Participant 4, line 160).

4.2.15 *Verbatim description of flow doesn't cover work that requires perseverance*

Executive Participant 7 whose description of flow incorporated multiple challenges provided an outlier response that flow included perseverance, and that this was not captured in the original description:

> Where you lose track of time where you're just enjoying everything that you do and it comes easily. And I suppose in my definition of flow sometimes it doesn't come easily but you keep trying because you know it's...you know where you're going. (Participant 7, Line 148).

4.2.16 *Verbatim doesn't resonate, sounds limited to a moment in time*

One of the executives felt strongly that flow was not limited to a single point in time, creating a disparity between the experienced flow and the verbatim description: "The part that doesn't resonate a little bit for me, is it sounds quite moment in timeish" (Participant 9, Line 193) and "but the time thing is maybe the difference "(Participant 9, Line 197).

4.3 Individual conditions that foster flow

4.3.1 *Confidence in skills level for flow activity*

Certain of the executive participants reflected feeling confident in their ability to perform the work required when experiencing flow. This confidence is attributed to several different sources, including experience, self-belief (Participant 7, Line 119), holding specific knowledge and being able to apply knowledge and skills (Participant 1, Line 38). One of the executives linked their confidence to the time spent in a specific role as leading to a desired skills level (Participant 7, Line 119). The confidence was similarly described as a comfort with the requirements of the role: *"*I think once you understand that it's something that you do and you're able to do well, you're comfortable in that space*."* (Participant 12, Line 50).

One of the executive coach respondents provided support for this view in sharing that one of their executive coachees "sees himself as a mover and a shaker, a dealer and a wheeler, so he likes that and he's very good at that." (Participant 16, Line 77).

4.3.2 *Deriving meaning from work supports experiencing flow*

Multiple executive respondents reflected that they experienced flow when the work they were performing held a personal meaning for them. The descriptor of the meaning varied between respondents, but the theme was clear: *"…*for me to be in flow, what I had to do had to have meaning to me*"* (Participant 7, Line 35).

Some respondents reflected meaning through a personal relationship with their work, one executive spoke about the brand they represented as a "brother" (Participant 7, Line 36) whilst another described their work output as their "baby" (Participant 12, Line 63). Participant 9 found meaning in the flow activity as it involved addressing the needs of others:

> So I think that was the first thing that was appealing, to be part of something that was...kind of had a higher purpose and that you were here to serve and that you were here to do things for clients and you were here to you know....fulfil people's kind of needs and not just your own needs. (Line 36).

A very personal connection with the work related to the flow activity emerged from Participant 11, who indicated that during this flow related work it was a case of: "trying to sleep but more ideas, or even I dream about it, then I know that oh this thing is really at the core of who I am as a human being*" (*Line *63).* For another respondent, it was about an "emotional investment in the output in order to kind of be in the flow" (Participant 4, Line 148). This theme was corroborated by an executive coach who shared about how meaningful work takes over the executive's life, such that there "…has to be a connection to either the product that you're manufacturing or the kind of culture or the calibre of client or colleague that you're dealing with" (Participant 16, Line 90).

4.3.3 *Flow experienced when feeling work is good*

Certain executives described feeling a flow experience when they felt their work output was effective, driven by a need to deliver (Participant 10, Line 56), or being on top of things: "And when you do excellent work you feel in the flow right?" (Participant 14, Line 168).

A triangulation of this point was provided by one of the executive coaches who confirmed this perspective by noting that during the flow experience "it's really important and they're making a difference and they're growing and they're thriving and always you know, they're performing well" (Participant 16, Line 58).

4.3.4 *Flow from a real kind of connection with people*

This code was derived from 29 quotes, and was quite deliberately labelled "from a real kind of connection with people" with an emphasis on real kind as the quotes

referred to more than simply holding conversations. This code describes communicating or giving fully, through speaking, engaging and listening, endeavouring to capture the meaningful nature of this connection as conveyed by the interview respondents: *"*I suppose it's that real focus on a person*."* (Participant 9, Line 99).

One executive spoke about experiencing flow where "everything I was doing was centred around imparting knowledge or giving [to] someone, doing something for someone." This reflects a deep connection with another person in teaching (Participant 11, Line 166). Aligned to this sentiment was a description that elaborated on the content of these conversations, "I feel I'm in the zone when I'm spending time with people one on one and we're just talking about who they are, what they do, what their aspirations are" (Participant 14, Line 63). One of the executive coach respondents shared that the connection that comes from coaching created a flow experience (Participant 5, Line 180).

4.3.5 *Flow from having influence or making an impact*

The respondents of the study reflected flow experiences in work that they felt made an impact. Every one of the executives interviewed contributed a quote to this code. Making an impact was narrated in different ways as making a difference, having influence, doing good, creating a positive outcome, adding value, and all this either at a business or a people level, from large scale impact to small wins. Participant 12 expressed it thus: *"*You must be doing something if you're going to have some impact, make changes, make things better, but there must be something that comes out of it*."* (Line 85).

Overall, many of these responses gave a sense of altruism, of looking to do more than simply make a profit for the organisation. For one of the executives this impact was of an enduring nature, *"…* and also you could see that if we pull this off, you're going to leave a legacy" (Participant 11, Line 40), whilst for another it related to delivering something tangible to their current business and its clients (Participant 3, Line 55). A more obviously altruistic impact was shared by

Participant 11, experiencing flow in the work where they had “created employment, you’re entrepreneurs, you make people money. “ (Line 45). Specifically this outcome is acknowledged as superior to simply making “loads of money” (Participant 11, Line 45).

One of executives shared a truly personal outlook on their need to make an impact, reflecting tight coupling of this with their reason for working.

> So I think I mentioned, to make a difference, so I firmly believe, I have to make a difference somewhere every day, otherwise what the hell am I doing here? And I think that the day I stop is the day I leave (Participant 8, Line 246).

4.3.6 *Full accountability is felt in flow experience*

This aspect within the flow experience was particularly important to one of the executives, for whom accountability referred to a feeling that the outcome of the flow activity, whether it is a good or a poor outcome, is “on you” (Participant 6, Level 89). This executive revealed that accountability was necessary to be able to invest more personally, in order for enjoyment to occur. Another respondent linked taking ownership and accountability to experiencing flow: “When you have clear accountability for people at that level, that they can own and take pride in because that's kind of what drives for me, flow, the way you describe it, that's what gets people in the zone” (Participant 4, Line 145).

4.3.7 *Purposeful work fosters flow*

Half of the executive participants reflected that the work being performed during their flow experience felt purposeful, could be linked to their values, expressed by one executive as getting something “bigger done” (Participant 9, Line 117). Another respondent described their perception of this work as being more than a job (Participant 7, Line 34).

Many of the responses reflected an aspirational quality, with Participant 11 sharing that the work could be viewed as a tool for social change, “and it was amazing for me because for once we were making money but it was soulful money” (Line 38). Some viewed the work as specifically aspirational, such as Participant 9 who referred to the work as “lofty and more aspirational and more inspirational if you like” (Line 152), while Participant 3 referred to the work being performed in the flow experience as having a “higher purpose” (Line 57) and that these more aspirational reasons were why they were actually doing this work in the first place (Line 110). A link between the purpose of the work being performed and motivation to do the work was outlined by one participant, elaborating that there was also a need to agree with the purpose (Participant 10, Line 95). Contrastingly, a less aspirational purpose was described by another Executive where the purpose was simply a case of being aware of the “end point” (Participant 8, Line 234).

The feedback from one of the executive coaches indicated a high correlation between the importance of the belief in the vision, or the belief in what was happening in the executive’s work to the experience of enjoyment at work:

> I think either if they have a good handle or they develop a good sense of what their purpose is, at that point they start to relish what they’re doing in their job more or maybe they then realise it's not the right place for them because it doesn’t fit their purpose (Participant 5, Line 92).

4.3.8 *Pursuing passion at work fosters flow*

A very personal, extreme passion emerged from some of the executive respondents. Participant 3 spoke of a passion to succeed and a strong belief in an idea (Line 99). The depth of this passion came through for Participant 6, in the words “Connected to this industry that I actually absolutely, absolutely love” (Line 201).

Some of the executives explained that they needed to feel passion for their work. Participant 13 described a passion regarding work being everywhere, "…. there's no switch off. So you need passion, loving it and you're in it, like it's in the shower, it's when you're sleeping" (Line 153). Similarly, Participant 11 explained how "it is at the heart of who I am. When I'm sleeping and I jump out of bed because I'm like, oh […] I thought of an idea (laughter)." (Line 61).

4.3.9 *Self-awareness fosters flow*

The link between self-awareness and flow was raised by two respondents. Multiple references from one of these executives were made to the need to understand oneself and to be grounded (Participant 7, Line 94).

The other participant shared a personal practice that ensured continued self-awareness to illustrate this point. This executive got up at 5am and spent time on reflection to maintain self-awareness, and to "remain in flow" (Participant 14, Line 105):

> And interestingly if I don't do it for a long period of time because I'm busy, out for dinners every night with brokers and stuff, I can feel that I'm losing something. So I think, a lot of it for me comes from there as well, like all the work I've done on myself as an individual. (Line 107).

4.3.10 *Work with flow makes use of personal strengths*

Several responses alluded to a link between the use of strengths and experiencing flow, although this emerged more from executive coaches than from executives directly. An executive respondent indicated that work with flow allowed using and playing to strengths (Participant 9, Line 156).

This sentiment was supported by all the executive coach respondents, in different forms. One of the executive coaches indicated that executive coachees enjoyed work where they were able to use their strengths (Participant 5, Line 105). A

second executive coach responded that the work characteristics which would support a flow experience for an executive “very much depends on what their strengths are” (Participant 15, Line 81) whilst the third executive coach felt that executives+’ awareness of their strengths would facilitate flow. (Participant 16, Line 194).

4.4 Type of work performed when experiencing flow

4.4.1 *Creativity unlocks flow*

The majority of responses in this category referred to creativity as an abstract concept, well demonstrated by Participant 6, “In all my previous jobs I loved the dealing with the agencies because it speaks to my creative self” (Line 66). A direct correlation was drawn by Participant 4 between creativity and flow experiences, stating that “creativity is for me always the way to unlock flow” (Line 104).

One executive respondent referred to writing as a specific creative activity, and another to marketing as a creative role, requiring thinking out of the box (Participant 9, Line 129).

4.4.2 *Flow activity – finances*

Two executives indicated that they experienced flow when working with finance related topics. Participant 7 enjoyed planning on where to spend budget allocated for a campaign (Line 50), whilst Participant 8 described getting into the zone when working through the monthly business reporting (Line 124).

4.4.3 *Flow activity – not limited to any given role*

Input from one executive provided an interesting perspective that experiencing flow is not restricted to any one activity: “You don’t have to be the boss, you don’t

have to have the big innovation role, you can and frankly be in a production line processing applications" (Participant 3, Line 131).

4.4.4 *Flow activity – analysis*

The experience of flow from activities that required some type of analysis was mentioned by a couple of executives. The analysis ranged from analysing data (Participant 7, Line 50), to analysing customer needs and requirements (Participant 2, Line 99).

4.4.5 *Flow activity – creating something new*

The act of creating something new was a widely repeated response to what respondents described as a flow activity. This included a wide range of activities, abstract and concrete in description. The nature of activities varied between creating a future, a vision, a new business division, an advert, to the more abstract concept of creative thinking – coming up with ideas, designing a template, products and services - the creative process overall.

Some respondents referred to creating something from "scratch", making something from nothing, as their flow activity (Participant 9, Line 43). This was portrayed differently by Participant 6 who experienced flow "when I see it coming alive" (Line 58). The experience of a "feeling that says you are on the cusp of a breakthrough of a new thing, it's terra nova, you're breaking your ground" (Participant 2, Line 32) provided a keen description of an abstract creative experience.

Responses showed that flow experiences were often related to anything that was "innovative stuff" (Participant 13, Line 30), or more specifically, for Participant 6, launching a brand new product into a new market (Line 40). One of the executives shared a flow experience when injecting a new culture into the organisation whilst conducting an overhaul of the business, referring to "lots of from and to charts – at a cultural level, at a consumer perception level, at a product level, so really

across 4 or 5 dimensions here, including the metrics planners" (Participant 4, Line 123).

The lack of predictability in creating new things emerged from Participant 3 as an abstract experience that fosters flow, with ideas that "may start in the left corner and land up in the top right hand corner" (Line 39).

4.4.6 *Flow activity - idea generation*

This category includes descriptions of the process of generating ideas, brainstorming, dreaming and coming up with stuff that's "never been thought" (Participant 11, Line 83).

4.4.7 *Flow activity – planning*

Three quotes explained how activities linked to planning resulted in flow. Planning activities included building a plan for an outcome or planning on how to get others to come on board: "So if something detracts from it you've got to get back in, so what's the detractor? What are we going to do to get back on track to make it believable?" (Participant 8, Line 51).

4.4.8 *Flow activity- seeing people learn and grow*

Various different activities that relate to supporting others and subsequently seeing them grow were communicated as flow activities. Participant 13 spoke of listening to people's ideas and helping them solve problems (Line 48), and Participant 11 talked about experiencing flow whilst teaching, "centred around imparting knowledge or giving someone, doing something for someone." (Line 166). Similarly Participant 4 indicated that flow occurred when witnessing how people became motivated and productive (Line 41).

4.4.9 *Flow activity – selling an idea*

One of the executives provided a quote that demonstrated flow when convincing others of the relative merits of a planned marketing campaign (Participant 7, Line 50). Likewise, for Participant 4, flow was experienced when selling an idea or a strategy to others, especially when “you see the lights come on” (Line 140).

4.4.10 *Flow activity – working with technology*

Two executives shared that they experienced flow when working with technology, one on a laptop (Participant 1, Line 60) and another when compiling code (Participant 10, Line 53).

4.4.11 *Flow activity driven by the activity itself*

This single quote provided insight into the experience of flow from the nature of the activity itself: “So I think that was fairly exhilarating to me and I think there are a number of things that kind of drive that, the one was the activity itself” (Participant 4, Line 65).

4.4.12 *Flow from leadership activities*

Flow from leadership activities provided one of the highest recurrence rates for quotes emerging from the data analysis. The explanations contained within this section include activities of business leadership, such as presenting concepts to the Board and obtaining their support and getting others to buy into a vision (Participant 7, Line 44), to flow from leading other people, a frequent response from executives in the study: “So I think some of the success for me is just making sure your people are just engaged and that kind of thing” (Participant 13, line 60).

Leadership activities at the organisational level were also cited as resulting in flow experiences. Flow was experienced by Participant 4 when heading an organisational turnaround (Line 129) and for Participant 11 writing the strategy

was a flow activity (Line 83). Putting in place organisational process/disciplines in creating a new business area created flow for Participant 9 (Line 69).

The leading of others emerged for several Executives. Helping others see the vision of a "bigger context, so almost like joining the dots, I always love doing that with people" was shared as a flow activity by Participant 9 (Line 69). Specifically serving others was a flow activity for Participant 1, sharing that flow is supported by "just having an open door to them in terms of the frustrations, they know they can come and talk to me about any frustration" (Line 112). This was extended by Participant 14 who elaborated that supporting the team in getting to perform well fostered flow, "So probing, questioning, challenging, highlighting things that they might not have thought of, without making them feel like it's not going to work" (Line 57).

4.5 Organisational conditions when flow is experienced

The response from executives in describing their flow experiences tended to include a description of the organisational context in which they found themselves during that experience. The analysis of the data found eight different organisational conditions being in place when flow occurred.

4.5.1 *Empowered to perform work that causes flow*

Every executive respondent provided a quote related to this point, giving it the highest recurring response rate of 45 quotations that describe an empowering environment in the organisation when flow occurs. Empowerment within the confines of this study refers to a broad spectrum of experiences through which the executive respondents felt that they were able to be in charge of their own destiny, described in varying degrees as a freedom to act and make decisions. This empowered organisational context for flow makes the executive feel they can operate without constraints, they can be in control to make decisions and that

actions are not imposed on them: "I also had the freedom to be and to decide and to come up with this idea." (Participant 11, Line 74).

One of the executives confirmed the control aspect of empowerment by contrasting the experience of control in flow and anti-flow activities as "So one of them I think is control, I have control over the one exercise I did and I have no control over the other" (Participant 1, Line 189). Another executive illustrated the empowerment they felt by sharing about having freedom to make decisions, only needing the boss to sign off on very specific issues, "and I've probably had to go to my boss for 3 or 4 decisions in the last 3 years" (Participant 14, Line 113).

One of the executive coaches reiterated the responses from the executives by sharing that "Where I've seen execs enjoying what they're doing more than anything else is where they're given some freedom of movement to make some kind of impact in whatever they're doing*."* (Participant 5, Line 98).

Generally these responses can be aligned to five different sub-themes emerging from the data analysis*.* The belief that you have the freedom demonstrated by Participant 13 who stated that *"*Yes, well no one's told me....well, maybe I don't have the freedom, no one's told me otherwise" (Lines 83-86). A second theme would be that empowerment is felt when there are no organisational barriers to doing what needs to be done (Participant 14, Line 113). A feeling of freedom to act is described by one executive who "had that freedom to kind of do what I thought worked or potentially would work" (Participant 1, Line 69), or due to absence of existing processes, or due to being given a mandate (Participant 9, Line 172). Exercising empowerment was shown by Participant 9 who referred to moulding an individual role (Line 158), and Participant 7 who spoke about experiencing flow when making the final decision (Line 67).

4.5.2 *Feeling valued at work links to flow experience*

Participants in the study referred to various forms of feeling valued when experiencing flow at work. This feeling originated from external reinforcement

(Participant 9, Line 111), recognition (Participant 4, Line 35) or feeling appreciated by others (Participant 14, Line 81) from some executive respondents, as compared to a more personal, internal belief that they were adding value to others (Participant 9, Line 148). One of the executives referred to a form of achievement experienced during a flow experience (Participant 6, Line 124).

Participant 6 illustrated the features of feeling valued described above and indicated that the opposite was also felt in anti-flow, providing corroboration for this theme:

> So that feeling of like achievement is like quite strong for me and I also by the way like, also have a strong recognition value, so I like to be recognised for stuff that I've done and stuff, but it's the opposite as well, where I don't like to be recognised like [..], I feel uncomfortable because I don't feel like it was me necessarily. I know I brought the team together, but so much was out of my control and choice, so it's just like, ok, it's fine (laughter) (Line 124).

Further support for this finding is provided by one of the executive coaches who referred to guiding executives to the realisation of a sense of their value and worth when discussing how executive coaches might guide executives to experience flow at work (Participant 15, Line 109).

4.5.3 *Flow in context of a strong leader*

Two of the executives referred to strong leadership being experienced during their respective flow experiences. This is portrayed as a leader offering guidance and support during the flow activity in question and access to necessary resources, effectively enabling ease of delivery of the work required. This same executive further expressed that the leadership team tolerated error, but still held high expectations and treated them with fairness (Participant 11, Lines 152 – 156).

An opposite impact, that of an autocratic culture, is portrayed by one of the executive coaches (Participant 5, Line 97), stating that this type of leadership style reduces work enjoyment for executives. Another executive communicated a view that an appreciation of a good organisational context contributed to the experience of flow at work, which this study attributed to strong leadership for creating that context.

> I think it's the fact that if you can appreciate what you're doing and the outcome it seeks to deliver, you will find yourself caught up in that moment and those moments become minutes and hours and you actually are so caught up in delivering something you're so passionate about that this happens. It's a natural consequence of appreciating the context within which you find yourself."*(*Participant 10, Line 90).

4.5.4 *Flow in context of clear outcomes*

This category refers to a need for the desired outcome of work conducted during a flow activity to be clear to the executive. The antithesis, where the lack of a clear outcome has a detrimental impact, was also referred to (Participant 7, Line 78). Executive respondents told how they made sure that the outcome was clear through planning, creating structure so as to *"*leave such a brain storming session with a brilliant idea, with clear next steps, as to what we've got to go and do*"* (Participant 3, Line 51) and a focus on an end goal of the activity (Participant 2, Line 166).

4.5.5 *Momentum at work enables flow*

Executive respondents disclosed how momentum at work, achieved through progress, or moving forward (Participant 2, Line 134), and pace at work, supported a flow experience. This same executive also revealed that the opposite of momentum, inertia, created a feeling of boredom (Participant 2, Line 104). Another executive reflected that an element missing from the verbatim

description of flow was momentum, interpreted in this study to mean that for this executive, momentum was experienced during flow at work (Participant 6, Line 178). A comprehensive description of momentum at work is explained by Participant 4: “Speed to execute, speed to move, speed to get impact, there are less meetings, more decisions, less selling, there’s more executing” (Line 95).

4.5.6 *Organisational and individual fit facilitates flow*

Sixteen quotes are encapsulated in this code, referring to a fit between the organisation and the individual in several dimensions. A fit between the organisation and individual’s values is explained by Participant 10: “find a good balance between what you seek and desire as your personal core values and how you can actually make that work within the organisational context” (Line 81). This fit is additionally recounted as an alignment between the individual’s capabilities and the organisation’s requirements of them, illustrated by Participant 2: “You’ve aligned how, what you are able to do, speaks to what is required” (Line 168). Executive respondent 10 shared yet another dimension of this fit, reporting a need for the individual executive to understand the context of their role in the organisation (Line 57).

This category is substantiated by a similar view from one of the executive coaches, commenting that executives referred to experiences where they were “allowed to be” themselves when they experienced enjoyment at work (Participant 16, Line 84).

4.5.7 *Positive work context linked to flow*

One of the executive responses represented the more general nature of the organisational context when flow is experienced: “you need to make sure that the brilliant basics, hygiene factors are in place because they can distort your flow if they are not in place” (Participant 11, Line 175).

Another reflection of this element was that as an individual one must want to be there (Participant 9, Line 178), and feel engaged (Participant 14, Line 119). Another executive shared that the executive needed to acknowledge and appreciate this positive context for the link to flow to be established (Participant 10, Line 90).

This link was corroborated by one of the executive coaches who commented that *"*The organisational context is very, very important for them in order to be able to enjoy what they're doing*"* (Participant 5, Line 97).

4.5.8 *Team support is present in flow activity*

The presence of team support in the flow activity is mentioned in 36 quotes, sourced from 13 participants. This category considers support that executives received from their relationship with their boss, distinct from the earlier category of flow in context of a strong leader which consolidates experiences within an environmental context created by a leader or from the broader group of leaders of the business, not necessarily the direct line manager of the executive in question (Participant 9, Line 105). Another executive respondent referred to flow being experienced in an environment where there was a degree of alignment with colleagues on an idea (Participant 3, Line 49), with yet another referring to a shared passion (Participant 11, Line 141).

A more direct response outlined having support from people around you, in multiple forms, demonstrated in the following quotes "had an amazing senior brand manager working on it" (Participant 6, Line 44), and "we'll do everything in our power to make sure you win. And if you fail it won't be because we didn't try*"* (Participant 11, Line 157) as well as *"*what helped me was the support of the markets and the global team as well as my boss, that was great" (Participant 6, Line 45).

Team support in the form of knowledge sharing is illustrated by Participant 1 who shared about drawing input or information and expertise from the people at work

during the flow activity (Line 57). Similarly, Participant 7 described experiencing a partnering relationship with the CEO's "right hand man"(Participant 7, Line 74). One of the executive respondents reported enjoying it when colleagues disagreed, but were still engaged in the activity and offered input:

> Ok, so that's quite interesting, so the easiest way is to have people who know, think similar to you, but that's the wrong way. So you have to get some people in the room who you know will challenge" (Participant 8, Line 65).

A slightly extended view of team support felt when experiencing flow at work was described by another executive who shared that support came in the form of a mentor, a coach, a personal trainer and family outside of work (Participant 14, Line 126-134).

Participant 9 spoke about having the ability to influence the CEO, and also having trust and support from the boss, holding an ability to influence "so suddenly my opinions become your opinion because it happens to be a topic where I think you trust what I have to say" (Participant 9, Line 111). The data analysis also identified how another executive experienced an ease of communicating with the boss, and that the boss shared the excitement and passion. This created a sense for this executive that the boss was aligned on the concept (Participant 11, Line 74; 141).

Team support was indicated by one of the executive coaches as a topic that emerged and was addressed in coaching:

> That's a very integral part of coaching, is this, you're feeling so challenged, where is your support coming from? And they actively start looking at how can you use more of your network to gain more support, how much support do you need? (Participant 15, Line 170).

4.6 Advice to achieve flow

Executives were asked how they would guide another person to achieve the experience similar to what they previously described as a flow experience at work. This question was intended to corroborate and probe executives' descriptions of their flow experience, assuming that there would be some kind of connection between their flow experiences and how they would guide others to achieve the same.

4.6.1 *Advice to achieve flow – be self-aware*

Executive respondents suggested that raising one's self-awareness supports achieving flow. This was typically also the first response provided by respondents to the question.

The advice to seek self-awareness was proffered most often, encapsulating a range of attributes for self-awareness: finding one's passion (Participant 9, Line 164); finding what you are good at (Participant 9, Line 166); having clarity on your contribution and understanding the value of your experiences (Participant 9, Line 166); what motivates you (Participant 9, Line 170); the choices and sacrifices made (Participant 9, Line 245); and ultimately being clear on who you want to be.

The responses all point to the need for individuals to raise their self-awareness so that it is *"*much more conscious awareness*" (*Participant 16, Line 192). The advice provided referred to self-awareness at different levels, ranging from a conceptual view of who the individual wants to be, an awareness of personal motivations and boundaries to more specifically being aware of passions, strengths, skills, capabilities and contribution, for example" *"*So the one thing I say to people is, know yourself and then go further*"* (Participant 13, Line 136), and *"*So what do you bring? What are your competencies? What are your experience? What are your strengths etc?" (Participant 9, Line 166).

The responses from the executive coaches echoed this sentiment, as one of the coaches referred to assisting executives to write up a Life Purpose plan, which is a tool to improve self-awareness, to support getting to flow, as well as introspection to know what makes them happy.

Overall these suggestions point to an overarching perspective that flow can be fostered through a mastery of oneself, starting with self-awareness:*"*….the one thing that I said to them was about self-mastering, so learn yourself, understand yourself, everything else doesn't matter because you have a problem connecting with things because you don't know who you are.....but that was it" (Participant 13, Line 134).

4.6.2 *Advice to achieve flow – harness the passion*

Certain executives (three to be exact) suggested that flow experience was supported by pursuing one's dream through work, believing in the value of the work being performed or feeling passionate about work, as Participant 1 expressed:' "So a lot of them I have to, you know, you need to harness the passion but not allow the negativity around it and the frustration to overwhelm the passion." (Participant 1, Line 109).

4.6.3 *Advice to achieve flow – get team support*

Team support was ascribed to all levels of relationship within the organisation, including superiors, stakeholders and colleagues (Participant 2, line 139). Team support included building rapport with these parties. This response was provided by some executives and by one of the executive coaches who specifically suggested that individuals should assess the support needed and received when working toward achieving a flow experience: "I would encourage them to establish connections with their colleagues, with their superiors, with their stakeholders and the people that they work with to ensure that there is constantly a positive rapport around positive progression." (Participant 2, Line 139).

4.6.4 *Advice to achieve flow – establish and understand where you hold control*

Some of the executives recommended that being in control was a contributor to a work flow experience: “Multi-facetted, looking inward, I would tell them to establish and understand those things for which they have absolute control” (Participant 2, Line 138).

4.6.5 *Advice to achieve flow – ensure personal fit with the organisation*

This advice reflected the need for the characteristics and values of the individual to be aligned with those espoused by the organisation to support achieving flow experiences. This fit is at both a conceptual level as well as at the level of the individual’s preferences, strengths and experience. It was indicated that this fit creates a “sweet spot” and a partnership between the individual and the organisation:

> I've got some quite robust advice which I give which is quite controversial from an organisational stand point. Most organisations have a set of core values or ethos that drives the organisation, my view is that as an individual level, you need to understand what your personal ethos principles and core values are as a starting point and when you understand what those are you need to juxtapose that against the organisation’s value. (Participant 10, Line 81).

Participant 9 expressed it as follows:

> So what do you bring? What are your competencies? What are your experiences? What are your strengths etc? And then, what is the organisation needing? And can you find something that, like a bit of a sweet spot if you like between those (Line 166).

One of the respondents went so far as to suggest that if this fit were not possible, then the individual should leave the organisation to seek this alignment elsewhere.

4.6.6 *Advice to achieve flow – ensure constantly moving forward*

The descriptor of "constantly moving forward" refers to taking the initiative to keep momentum in one's work outputs, and in personal growth where moving forward is described as learning and growing at the individual level. The executives alluded to the importance of taking control of these elements and the type of elements to focus on to do so.

> One of the things that you control as well as an individual is your ability to learn, to learn new things, read up about new stuff, attend symposiums or talks and presentations, do whatever it is you need to do to strengthen your position. Have the necessary relationships, have the necessary understanding of the things that you control to ensure that you're constantly moving forward. (Participant 2, Line 140).

4.7 Description of anti-flow experience

This section describes the themes emerging from the descriptions provided for anti-flow experiences. This information is collated from the responses from executives when they were prompted to describe an experience at work where they felt bored or disinterested.

4.7.1 *Anti-flow activities sap energy*

Executives characterised an anti-flow experience as draining energy at an emotional level and being demotivating (Participant 14, Line 157). This description included a view that it was a struggle to get this type of work done (Participant 13, Line 120). Participant 3 said it was "emotionally draining" (Line 111) but also that "the people that knew me really well, saw me like get a bit

quieter and introverted because I was struggling, I was struggling to get that energy. I was looking harder for the energy.*"* (Line 120).

4.7.2 *Difficult to perform an anti-flow activity*

Respondents shared that it was difficult to perform work in an anti-flow experience, and that this was attributable to multiple factors, such as a lack of interest in the work required, high distractibility (Participant 8, Line 127), as well as the work requirement being daunting (Participant 12, Line 105).

4.7.3 *Anxiety due to skills deficit*

Executive respondents communicated an anxiety, and in some cases, fear caused by a lack of belief in their ability to perform a new role into which they had recently been promoted or shifted. A sense of being overwhelmed and feeling out of one's depth was indicated. One executive shared the need for additional training to close perceived skills gaps. This sentiment was supported by one of the executive coaches:

> So rather than feeling overwhelmed and that they can't cope in this organisation, their level of anxiety is linked to whether they're performing well or not, or whether they perceive themselves to be performing well, so that can raise the levels of anxiety. (Participant 5, Line 152).

This skills deficit was described as relating to inadequate experience and capability. This anxiety impacted confidence: "sense of deep anxiety that goes with that around being able to perform and having this second and third guessing themselves at a very deep sort of level*"* (Participant 15, Line 35).

A lack of skills was deemed to prevent flow from occurring, and foster a sense of uncertainty at a personal level of the value of the contribution being made: *"*Yes, because if you...so take the example when I say when there's something where

I don’t know what they’re talking about, you can’t get in the zone” (Participant 8, Line 171).

4.7.4 *Anti-flow work is easy to do*

This response came from one executive, but as an outlier it reflected the possibility that work that is too easy to do can actually result in anti-flow. This may be interpreted as being linked to a lack of challenge in the work requirements:

> ”So actually on […] I was out of flow because I was bored, not that I was bored, in 3 months I fixed everything that needed to be fixed on it because it was a little bit too...you know and that's because of the experience I had had on […] and I’d learnt a lot about leadership as well (Participant 7, Line 104).

4.7.5 *Anti-flow experience is not boring, but frustrating and stressful*

The question was phrased using the terminology from the academic literature where anti-flow refers to work that is boring, and in which individuals are disinterested (M Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a). A theme that emerged from the interviews was that an anti-flow experience is less characterised as boring than as frustrating and stressful. This perspective seemed to emanate from a view that at this level there was no time to feel bored due to the typically voluminous workload: “Shew, just thinking of something specific....it’s hard to get bored around here” (Participant 1, Line 74).

A feeling of frustration surfaced as a common theme during anti-flow experiences: “Yes, so I think, I guess, bored disinterested, more frustrated than bored and disinterested, you know” (Participant 4, Line 81).

The responses from two executive coaches confirmed that executives referred to anxiety and stress when describing anti-flow: “The bored aspect would not come

out as quickly, the stress aspect would come out more quickly". (Participant 16, Line 51).

4.7.6 *Anti-flow is not an enjoyable experience*

A general feeling of a lack of enjoyment and displeasure during an anti-flow activity was provided in the form of irritation with the activity (Participant 1, Line 86) and a more overarching characteristic of being an "Achilles heel" (Participant 8, Line 122). Anti-flow was viewed as a negative experience, with the potential to create an extremely harmful outcome: "sometimes soul destroying for people" (Participant 3, Line 111).

4.8 Perception of work performed in anti-flow experience

The responses contained in the category relate to the answers from participants when they were probed to describe what it was about the work being performed in anti-flow that made them feel disinterested or that it was not enjoyable.

4.8.1 *Anti-flow when bored*

This description emerged for certain respondents where they referred to an experience opposite of flow. This includes specific spontaneous references of the executive's own accord, such as "on […] I was out of flow because I was bored" (Participant 7, Line104), or that work was not interesting with no new ideas or creativity experienced "without any new or dynamic activity to stimulate new thinking and creativity" (Participant 2, Line 98) and Participant 10, who stated "but I was kind of bored out of my mind at the time" (Line 66).

4.8.2 *Anti-flow when work had no personal meaning*

Some of the executive respondents shared that anti-flow was experienced when they experienced a low level of belief in the work being performed, the work felt

fleeting or it was unclear why the work was even being performed. Participant 1 specifically referred to work becoming a “sausage factory” (Line 126).

This type of work was experienced as deeply incongruent by some of the respondents. Participant 11 said that “when you’re struggling it's partly because it's just not at the core of who you are, it's not exciting your soul.” (Line 64). Participant 2 disclosed a similarly private experience of not being able to put heart and soul into work during anti-flow (Line 98). This type of work felt foreign to Participant 12 (Line 109), and was debilitating for Participant 4 when there was no passion felt for the work being performed (Line 100). By contrast, a lack of meaning at the organisational level was expressed by Participant 10 who indicated an anti-flow experience when “there is no bigger picture for the work being performed” (Line 70).

4.8.3 *Individual worth questioned in anti-flow experience*

The analysis of the data uncovered a sense of being devalued, with individual worth at work being questioned in an anti-flow experience. A clear indication of not being valued was expressed by Participant 1, stating that “you’re employed because you have a certain level of expertise and knowledge and you know, and certain aptitude and then it's almost...not completely ignored, but it’s devalued in a way”(Line 127). This executive respondent narrated a metaphor of moving from being a knowledge worker to a factory worker at the current workplace, to describe the feeling of being in anti-flow.

A sense of insecurity on the level of contribution emerged from Participant 15, who felt unclear whether he or she was contributing enough and “making the grade” (Line 115). A sense that the organisation “crowds you out” was experienced by Participant 14 during anti-flow (Line 143).

One of the executive coaches referred to cases where executives felt overlooked or underutilised, “underutilised in terms of his own area of potential, his brain and in his heart” (Participant 16, Line 72). This same coach described how one

executive coachee had felt that his ability to think at a high level of complexity had been overlooked, causing unhappiness at work. An interesting observation was further made by this coach, indicating that there were times where the executive believed he was capable of more than he really was (Participant 16, Line 174).

4.9 Type of work performed when anti-flow is experienced

The responses contained in the category reflected the answers from participants when they were probed to describe what it was about the work being performed in anti-flow that made them feel disinterested or that it was not enjoyable.

4.9.1 *Anti-flow work is easy to do*

This single quote stood out, where this executive found work during anti-flow so easy and boring that he started doing something else to remain stimulated.

> So I was able to put the right people in the right places, get rid of the....so I was able to in 3 months basically change my agency, change the team if I needed to, put it back on a growing path and then I was like [...] and then I started running actually (Participant 7, Line 106).

4.9.2 *Work attributes of anti-flow work – operational stuff*

Operational, repetitive work that is routine and administrative is characteristic of anti-flow work. Participant 13 said “I hate the operational stuff, so that never creates flow for me” (Line 30). Procurement decisions, budgets, debates with finance were experienced as debilitating by Participant 4, Line 100.

4.9.3 *Work attributes of anti-flow – project management*

Project management was exhausting and not liked by two of the executive respondents.

4.10 Organisational context when anti-flow is experienced

This group of questions was included in the interview to corroborate the findings for the organisational context when flow is experienced, and reflects quotes that emerged from respondents when describing anti-flow experiences.

4.10.1 *Anti-flow from organisational inability to get things done*

The responses analysed reflect the answers pertaining to the question of what executives' experiences were when they felt that they were in a situation opposite to the flow experience. The responses in this code family generally reflect a set of organisational circumstances that were experienced as unpleasant by the executive. This theme manifested in multiple ways, including a reference to politics within the organisation and the impact that this could have on making progress (Participant 1, Line 78). It was further explained by this respondent that the inability to get work done resulted in deadlines being missed. A similar lack of delivery was shared by Participant 2 who indicated that "things are just not moving and we want to move along but for whatever reason, we're stuck, we're flat lined, it's boring" (Line 106). Another executive experienced anti-flow in an environment where the team got caught up in a debate, resulting in what they referred to as the "gravity of anti-flow" (Participant 4, Line 95). A comparable experience was described as working with colleagues who did not grasp the concept being discussed, resulting in a need to discuss over and over again. Participant 3 described this as creating an inability to get things done during anti-flow (Line 75).

A more general "stagnation in progress" (Participant 2, Line 98) prevented one of the executives from getting things done, whilst for Participant 8, the effort of the work in anti-flow outweighed any benefit of the outcome (Line 98). This same executive referred to the effect on progress where "people are more focussed about the process rather than the outcome." (Participant 8, Line 102).

4.10.2 *Anti-flow from poor team support*

The impact of poor team support on the levels of enjoyment at work occurred in 20 quotes as a recurring theme. Teams in this instance were experienced as misaligned, lacking an understanding of what the individual was doing, constantly challenging, argumentative, emotional, or even as underperforming.

The topic of politics and team misalignment were described by certain respondents, with specific reference to an experience where politics “sucks energy” (Participant 13, Line 75). The outcome of poor team support was shared as a feeling of frustration by Participant 6, in whose experience the lack of support created a feeling that:

> You can really want to do something and really want to drive it but if you don’t feel like you’ve got the right level of support behind it then it doesn’t matter because actually all you’re doing is hitting a brick wall and it's like you move two steps forward and one step back all the time, it's just like, this is frustrating (Line 54).

One of the executives indicated that poor team support could derail other flow factors*.* Participant 6 reflected that being unable to obtain team support for the work being completed changed exciting work into a negative and draining experience (Line 100). An extreme case of poor team support was demonstrated by an experience of divisive behaviour from teams at work, where it seems as if teams were actually looking for the executive to fail:

> Some people maybe like proving people wrong, I don’t, like I like to have agreement and alignment because then no matter what brick wall I hit as I go along, I know that we’re all thinking of one thing that we want to achieve and will be able to get through it. But if I hit a brick wall and people don’t even want me to do this thing, and I'm just like, ok, why am I doing this? (Participant 6, Line 102).

4.10.3 *Anti-flow in context of poor leadership*

Certain respondents indicated an experience of leadership which lacked integrity, or of leadership treating people badly when anti-flow was experienced. Participant 11 described a lack of leadership integrity thus: “you can see that the leadership, when they say this is what they do, there is no congruence” (Line 72). Another poor leadership experience during anti-flow was provided by Participant 14, who shared about a downsizing effort, where, rather than the actual downsizing being the challenge, it was *“*the way in which they went about it was I think deplorable, they treated people very badly” (Line 40). This executive actually left that employer due to this experience.

4.10.4 *Anti-flow through a belief in low impact of work*

Several executive respondents provided feedback that they did not enjoy work that had a low impact. This low impact was portrayed as “wishy-washy work” (Participant 9, Line 132) that was not properly linked to the organisational need at that time. A similar sentiment was conveyed by Participant 11 who explained how work during anti-flow was conducted to simply *“*tick a box*”* (Line 64) and Participant 12 who depicted an experience of not feeling needed, reinforced by a view that “you are just a cog in the machine*”* (Line 85).

Another executive found that work required for no apparent reason resulted in a lack of flow (Participant 8, Line 104). Participant 1 communicated that the work conducted during anti-flow experiences was “doomed” to fail (Line 124) and was never set up to get to the intended outcome. In such cases the same respondent felt as though the outcome was beyond their control, with very little room to provide personal input into the work (Line 131).

4.10.5 *Anti-flow when feeling disempowered*

This category was established through a high number of quotes, with 39 linked to this category. Disempowerment emerged in an extreme form where one

executive experienced being required to conform to a certain work aspect even whilst not believing in it, as well as being constantly questioned at the behest of others and their agendas, with little control or influence (Participant 1, Line 95). An alternative feeling of disempowerment was illustrated through an experience of not being heard, and being inadequately consulted on issues that impacted the executive's part of the business (Participant 3, Line 70). Participant 6 referred to feeling disempowered when their role held no value, being viewed as simply a figure head (Line 112).

Another executive spoke of a pretence of empowerment by the organisation, where things were imposed and executives were instructed what to do. This impacted enjoyment and desire to complete the work in question, "they're going to tell us what to do anyway, so what's the point of putting so much energy and effort, knowing that you're going to be instructed or directed anyway*?"* (Participant 11, Line 72). Respondent 13 explained a similar form of disempowerment when being told what to do:

> He's like, I'm not listening to you, you're wrong, I'm telling you, no questions, you do this now, you do it the way I tell you to do it and whatever. To which my response is, I'm too highly paid for this job, you need a monkey. You need a monkey because you're going to tell this monkey (Participant 13, Line 103).

A sense of a lack of control was shared by Participant 3 who described feeling a low ability to influence work outcomes when there were changes in the external environment of the business, regulation in particular (Line 70). One of the executive coaches provided a view of an executive coachee who struggled when not feeling in charge (Participant 16, Line 234).

An experience of relying on others to deliver on the technology aspects of a product created an encounter with disempowerment for Participant 2, moving from the enjoyable experience of generating an idea where anything is possible to its technical implementation with all its restrictions (Line 66). This occurrence

seemed related to that of Participant 6 who experienced anti-flow when unable to control the desired outcome end-to-end, being unable to influence the entire value chain (Participant 6, Line 112).

4.10.6 *Anti-flow when no organisational or individual fit*

A lack of fit between an individual and the organisation emerges in the data analysis as a condition when anti-flow is experienced. The responses included in this category showed a very personal feeling from the respondents, linking it to how they saw themselves, well represented by Participant 11 thus: " I find myself being unhappy at […] maybe it's because [...] it's not because there is no flow, it's just that I don't fit, my personality, my being, it just doesn't [...] my energy and soul just doesn't fit, I just don't fit*"* (Line 235).

One of the executive coaches commented that executives would say they were uncertain about being fit for purpose in their organisation when finding themselves in an unenjoyable work situation: "Well, are they the right person for this*?*" (Participant 15, Line 115).

4.10.7 *Anti-flow when required outcomes are unclear*

Two executives shared that the required outcomes of their work were unclear during their anti-flow experience. Both cases reflected extreme lack of clarity: the one didn't know what the job was (Participant 9, Line 130); and Participant 11 experienced anti-flow when "one is not clear what we're doing, why we're doing it". (Participant 11, Line 72).

4.11 Overcoming anti-flow

This category reflects the responses by respondents regarding what they would do when they were feeling the opposite of flow at work.

4.11.1 *Overcome anti-flow - change nature of work activity being performed*

Participants provided examples where they had moved on to do other work within their current role or adopted a new role to overcome anti-flow.

One of the proactive interventions mentioned was to actively seek things out that they enjoyed doing, in order to get more balance between anti-flow and flow related activities, or to do the same work in a different way.

> I will try and say, ok, so here it is, it's flat lined, it's boring, how do we make it interesting? Do we change the colour, do we you know position it somewhat differently, it's the same product, same service offering, same everything, but because I've made this single pitch so many times, I'm going to do it a little differently today, you know? (Participant 2, Line 108).

Participant 10 talked about actively seeking to learn new things when feeling bored at work (Line 72). An executive coach extended this suggestion by indicating that executives looked to their personal strengths and undertook more activities and that used these to overcome anti-flow. This coach also re-emphasised that executives looked to do things they loved to overcome anti-flow:

> oh my gosh and that's when they realise it's linked to their strengths, what they absolutely love doing and the understanding of ok, if I can build more of that into my day that will balance out the things that I have to do that aren't what I love doing*"* (Participant 15, Line 45).

Participant 13 shared with some humour that executives have the opportunity to delegate the work they do not enjoy to others. This delegation could also be to an individual that enjoys that kind of work, such that the executive then enables "them to get their flow through that*".* (Line 37). This executive also obtained assistance from a coach to avoid going into a "negative space*"* at work (Participant 13, Line 128).

4.11.2 *Overcome anti-flow through a change in mind-set*

Certain study participants shared experiences of shifting their attitude or mind-set to overcome anti-flow. Participant 3 taught themselves to moderate anxiety through an awareness that it could simply be a negative thought (Line 85). A clearer approach is expressed by Participant 2: "Let's redefine it, let's talk about it differently, let's engage with it differently, let's propose it differently and let's try and you know, just re-inject that energy towards what we are trying to do" (Line 100).

4.12 Linking Executive Coaching and flow

4.12.1 *Coaching can raise awareness of flow*

Two of the executive coaches responded to the question on whether there was any reference to flow in coaching or how a coach would move an executive from anxiety into flow.

Both coaches indicated that they would provide a description of a flow experience to the executive. One of the coaches indicated that they would subsequently support executives in working toward flow by using a description for flow, referring to the one used in this research to:

> ask them to describe a time in their career […] to actually talk about it. And that's what I would do, I would give them a bit of context around why that is because what is the […] you know, just explain it, if somebody was more challenging like, what is the connection to this in terms of being more productive or being more […] enjoying your life more, being happier, healthier (Participant 16; Line 223).

The view is that this would enable a linking of the activities that bring flow.

A more specific approach was shared by Participant 15 who indicated that over and above considering the coachee's strengths, the session would also involve

using a descriptor to establish what type of work the coachee derived enjoyment from, when time became irrelevant (Line 192).

4.12.2 *Coaching questions to address anti-flow at work*

One of the executive coaches provided responses that reflected coaching questions to use in addressing anti-flow at work. Participant 16 described how to explore how anti-flow had come about for the executive (Line 153). This coach would ask the executive to reflect on *"*How is that limiting you? What do you want to do about it? Where does it come from*?*"(Line 153) to guide the executive in addressing anti-flow.

4.12.3 *Executive Coaching can assist in garnering organisational support*

Executive coaches illustrated how the element of the coaching process that gathers information and feedback from the executive's peers, subordinates, and superiors could be used to garner organisational support for executive coachees. The forms of interaction and feedback shared included a view that "So that we get the boss, the peers and the subordinates and that quite often flushes things out" (Participant 5, Line 131**),** using a 360 degree feedback (Participant 5, Line 139) process and meeting with the coaches to get feedback.

4.12.4 *Executive coaching can enable knowledge and use of strengths*

Two of the three coaches suggested that executives could come to know their strengths and the implications of these through coaching. These responses reflected that the executives could arrive at an understanding of their strengths, apply them and identify how they enjoyed using their strengths at work (Participant 5, Line 106).

> In that moment because what is needed will be there. So very much based on what strengths do you bring to that challenge? What can you use to address the challenge and to alleviate your anxiety and also how can you

use your anxiety to drive you to where you need to be (Participant 15; Line 39).

4.12.5 *Executive Coaching can enable self-awareness*

All executive coach respondents and two executives responded in varying ways that coaching can enable self-awareness for the coachee. Participant 5 shared: “start with some kind of building personal awareness side of things” (Line 67).

The nature of the self-awareness that respondents felt their coachees develop included coming to a better understanding of their own values, clarity on what motivated them, their purpose for being, “big picture stuff”: “I think what also comes out and why the personal vision issue is so important, is that one of the questions I ask in the personal vision exercise is, basically, what’s your purpose for being?” (Participant 5, Line 90).

More specifically, one of the coaches referred to the use of strengths tools in supporting self-awareness to assist coachees in coming to an increased awareness of their strengths. Participant 5 stated that “per strength how you could use it at work …Because they acknowledge, it's like self- affirming that that is who I am” (Line 101). One of the executives shared how working with a coach assisted in building self- belief, which that executive then linked to an experience of flow (Participant 7, Line 36). Another executive coach participant provided anecdotal feedback that reflected how one executive coachee shifted through the coaching process to become more authentic (Participant 16, Line 70).

4.12.6 *Summary of code families*

The data analysis journey from the interviews to the code families is illustrated in the diagram below.

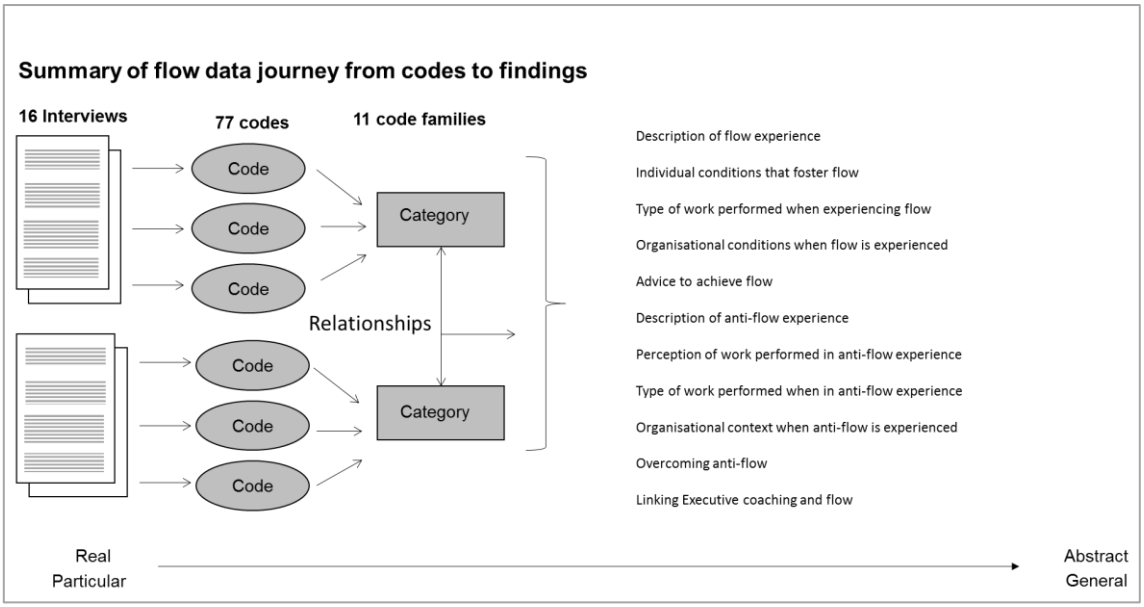


Figure 9. Summary of flow data from codes to findings adapted from Saldana (2009)

The code family on the "Description of flow experience*"* provides a rich description of executive flow experiences at work, outlining the various characteristics the respondents attributed to this personal experience. The antecedents for executive flow experience are contained within three separate code families: the *Individual conditions that foster flow* code family describes the specific conditions in place when flow is experienced at the level of the individual; the work attributes present are depicted in the *Type of work performed when experiencing flow* code family; and finally the organisational environment is portrayed in the *Organisational conditions when flow is experienced* code family. The *Advice to achieve flow* code family provides details on the focus areas executives felt, which, if addressed, could increase the likelihood of flow experiences in the workplace. The following five code families detailed executive experiences of the opposite of flow, termed anti-flow. The *Description of the anti-flow experience* code family details the characteristics of this experience, whilst the individual's encounter with anti-flow due to the work activity performed is addressed in the *Perception of work performed in anti-flow* and *Type of work performed when in anti-flow* code families respectively. The specific

organisational context experienced during anti-flow is specified in the *Organisational context when anti-flow is experienced* code family. Executives' insights into the actions they have taken to move out of anti-flow are contained in the *Overcoming anti-flow* code family. The final code family lists the possible areas where coaching may be related to Executive flow experiences, in a code family entitled *Linking Executive Coaching and flow*.

4.12.7 *Summary*

This chapter outlined the findings from the data analysis process. The analysis was automated in ATLAS.ti.7 using the transcriptions from the interviews as input. The analysis identified 77, narrowed down to eleven code families. The code families have been illustrated through the inclusion of respondent quotes from the transcripts, keeping the findings as close to the data as possible, as necessary in an inductive analysis of this nature.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The themes emerging from the data analysis process are outlined and assessed in this chapter. Each theme includes a discussion on how the theme has been identified in the data, a comparison of the theme to the existing body of knowledge, concluding with the possible implications of this theme.

5.2 Theme 1 - Executive flow experiences have similarities to existing knowledge of flow and flow at work

5.2.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The interview for both the executives and the executive coaches ended with a verbatim description of the original flow experience in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975a) work. This was intended to confirm the detail of the responses elicited earlier from the executives on their flow experiences. The majority of respondents felt that this extract reflected their flow experience.

The data from the study describe the characteristics of executives' flow experiences, and the causes of these experiences at the level of the individual, the work performed, and the organisational context within which flow is experienced.

According to this research, executive flow experiences are characterised by enjoyment, a positive state of mind, and positive emotions. Executive respondents in this study found themselves engrossed in flow activities, and experienced them as energising. Even though flow activities were described as challenging, respondents still referred to these experiences as effortless, during which they lost track of time.

Executives in this study derived meaning and purpose from work during which they experienced flow, with a feeling that they were doing good work, through which they could make an impact. They felt full accountability for their work when in flow, as well as feeling confident in their ability to perform the work required, possibly feeling that they were making use of their strengths during that time. Executives experience flow when making a real connection with people.

Executives experienced positive organisational conditions characterised by strong leadership and team support during flow. They found this empowering. There was a good fit between the executive and the organisation, with the individual feeling valued by the organisation. The outcomes required from the executive were clear and it was possible to achieve momentum in moving forward with work.

Whilst flow is indicated as being related to the actual work being performed, and not necessarily linked to one activity, some specific work activities emerged from this study which indicated that creativity and planning activities foster flow.

5.2.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Existing literature considered the flow experiences of several roles in the workplace including white collar and blue collar workers (Allison & Duncan, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), music teachers (Bakker, 2005), secondary high school teachers (Salanova et al., 2006), and accountants and care workers (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). Flow experiences of executives in the workplace have not previously been documented.

The findings of this study confirm that executive flow experiences show similarities to the known characteristics of flow, and flow at work. Executive flow experiences occur, as described by the original flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a), when there are clear goals; a skills-challenge balance with the work; executives feel focus and concentration on what they are doing; executives feel in control of their experience; and the activity may be autotelic.

Executive flow experiences are described at three different levels: a) at the level of the individual experience; b) in respect of the organisational conditions present during flow; and c) related to the type of work being performed when flow is experienced. This is aligned with the existing literature on flow experiences at work which are attributed to individual, organisations, and job resources (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Moneta, 2012; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Salanova et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2007).

Similarly, the study outcomes confirm that existing knowledge of flow experiences at work is also applicable to executives in most cases. Not only do executives experience the antecedents for flow at work as identified by Bakker (2005), the data further reveal that executives experience absorption, intrinsic motivation, and enjoyment during flow experiences at work, also predicted by Bakker in the seminal definition of flow at work (2005). The finding that self-efficacy supports work flow experiences (Salanova et al., 2006) is evident in executive flow experiences. The facilitation of flow at work at the individual and at the organisational level (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010) is equally evident in executive flow experiences at work. A possible link between strengths knowledge and well-being as documented by Govindji and Linley (2007) emerged in this study as a direct link between flow and strengths.

Fullager and Kelloway's identification of the ability to manipulate flow in the workplace is borne out in the study findings. Specific existing literature related to flow at work is confirmed as applicable to executives: Moneta's findings that a match between the environment and the person supports flow (2012) is consistent with the findings of this study; Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model (JCM) study that indicated that motivation is positively impacted when work performed is seen to have an impact on others (1976) is borne out in the findings; and finally the positive link between innovation at work and the occurrence of flow (Salanova et al., 2006) is evidenced in this study's finding that creativity fosters flow. Finally the description of anti-flow by Allison

and Duncan (1988) as occurring when challenge and control are lacking is reflected in executive flow experiences.

5.2.3 *Conclusion*

The study thus extends existing literature on flow at work by confirming that many of the documented flow and flow at work characteristics are also applicable to executives and their flow experiences. This may imply that the documented positive consequences of flow could be applicable to executives. This possibility highlights the value to organisations of considering the development of interventions in support of executive flow experiences.

5.3 Theme 2 - Executive flow experiences occur over an extended period of time

5.3.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

Executives tended to describe their flow experiences as enduring over a period of time, not as a single moment in time. Executive respondents referred to flow as a continuous and sustained experience. These periods ranged from portions of a week or for the duration of a specific project to multiple years. One executive in particular commented that the flow experience was not limited to the short period of time indicated in the verbatim description of flow.

5.3.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Flow experiences in the original literature are characterised as episodic in nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a), whilst the current definition of flow in the workplace refers to a “short-term, peak experience” (Bakker, 2005, p. 401).

5.3.3 *Conclusion*

The findings of this study therefore contradict the current descriptions of flow and flow at work by recognising an enjoyable work experience over an extended period of time. This discrepancy may be attributed to the nature and longer term focus required of an executive role, but this causal relationship would need to be more deeply considered in another study for confirmation.

5.4 Theme 3 - Executives do not receive immediate feedback on the outcome of their flow activity

5.4.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

Executives did not rely on immediate feedback on the outcome of their flow activity to experience flow. The data indicated that executives receive delayed feedback on their work performance through tools such as business measures, colleague or client feedback, or milestone tracking. Some executives did not receive feedback at all on the outcome of their performance in the flow activity. Additional responses referred to the executive experiencing flow due to the nature of the work itself, implying that there was no feedback other than from performing the activity.

5.4.2 *Comparison to the literature*

In the original studies defining flow, it was shown that one of the qualities that made play activities enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b) was enjoying the activity for its own sake rather than any external reason, referred to as an autotelic experience. Additionally the literature identifies that one of the core characteristics of flow is that the individual receives immediate feedback on the outcome of the activity being performed (M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). The JCM which has been found to have a positive link to flow at work

(Demerouti, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976) indicates that feedback comes from the team working with the individual.

5.4.3 *Conclusion*

The findings of this study contradict existing literature on flow by demonstrating that executives do not rely on immediate feedback to consider an activity as flow inducing. The study does however support the finding that feedback is received from the activity itself, as theorised by Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) or from the team and people around you, albeit in a delayed manner, as postulated in the Job Characteristics Model (Demerouti, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Some possible explanations for the contradiction may be that executives rely more on the autotelic nature of the work to provide feedback, or in other words, perhaps executives enjoy their work more for its own sake. This could be linked to the fact that their work during flow has meaning and purpose to them as indicated in other findings. This in turn may suggest that in designing interventions to increase executive flow experiences, immediate feedback is less important than other factors regarding the role performed.

5.5 Theme 4 - The type of flow work activity and the frequency of flow vary by respondent

5.5.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The research study uncovered several different types of work being performed by executives during their flow experience. A generally applicable work activity related to work that required executives to be creative, such as launching a new product, or brand. Similarly performing leadership activities was largely applicable across respondents, referring to work such as leading others, creating buy-in to the business vision and supporting others to succeed at work.

At a functional level of work activities, working with finances, technology, conducting analysis, generating ideas, planning, seeing people learn and grow, and selling an idea were listed as flow activities. An outlier response was that experiencing flow was not dependent on the role the executive was fulfilling. The inherent nature of the work itself was also indicated as fostering flow.

The frequency of flow experiences varied across the respondents, including a range of time intervals, from no flow experiences in the current job, and reduced flow experiences in the current role to respondents that experienced flow daily or often. One of the respondents attributed differences in frequency due to the personal and subjective nature of such flow experiences. This observation is corroborated by another set of responses where it was noted that the experience of flow is distinct to each individual as a personal feeling.

5.5.2 *Comparison to the literature*

The original theory of flow establishes that it is a subjective and personal experience at the level of the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a). Specific activities deemed to link to flow at work have however been documented across different population samples. Bryce and Haworth (2002) considered problem-solving, dealing with conflict, meeting deadlines and achieving goals, planning meetings, negotiating with customers, and learning new skills and roles as flow activities. Nielsen and Cleal (2010) established that the work activities of planning, problem-solving, and evaluation activities are significant predictors of flow at work.

5.5.3 *Conclusion*

This study confirms the personal and subjective nature of flow, depicted in the responses from the executives and in the variation of flow activities and the frequency of flow experienced. However, this study extends the existing literature on the typical activities of planning, problem solving, and evaluating the Nielsen

and Cleal (2010) found to be predictors of flow at work by providing other functional activities.

The implication may be that the more important factor for consideration in executive flow experiences is to focus on the individual subjective experience when performing any given work activity to ascertain its relationship to the flow experience for that individual, rather than focusing on the nature of the activity performed as being the key predictor of flow. This suggestion offers another possible fit between coaching as an intervention to support the increased likelihood of flow experiences at work as coaching is primarily a one-to-one process between the coach and the coachee (Hamlin et al., 2008), potentially better enabling the exploration of the personal and subjective flow experience of the individual.

5.6 Theme 5 - Flow experiences of executives appears to be consistent across gender

5.6.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The study targeted 13 executives, with an equal split of men and women interviewed. No consistent distinction emerged in the flow experiences based on gender. Certain responses were provided by all executives, whilst others typically displayed a mix across gender to varying degrees.

This study identified that men and women experience anti-flow at work, and that both genders experience flow from making a connection with people.

5.6.2 *Comparison to the literature*

A distinction between the factors giving rise to flow for men and women at work is identified by Bryce and Haworth (2002) who investigated the difference in activities between flow experiences of men and women. Their findings concluded

that whilst certain elements were common for men and women, such as the association of flow experiences with general measures of well-being, there are gender differences in the activities giving rise to flow at work and in leisure.

Allison and Duncan (1988) considered the flow experiences of women at work. The experience of anti-flow at work came to the fore through their study, and they identified that one of the antecedents for flow at work for women was through interacting or connecting with others.

5.6.3 *Conclusion*

The findings of this study contradict existing literature that identified different causes of flow for men and women. This study illustrates that the antecedents for, and characteristics of flow for male and female executives do not vary by gender.

This report on executive flow experiences also extends existing literature on anti-flow, since the previous study on this only included a sample of women at work. This study illustrates that anti-flow is experienced by male executives. Further to this, this study also illustrates that the identified flow activity of connecting with others applies to men as well as to women.

The similarity across gender emerging from the executive flow study may be attributed to the similarity of the work activities required at an executive level, that perhaps there may be a correlation between the role and the level at which the activity is fulfilled and flow experiences. This would however need to be explored further in another study. A further implication of this finding may be that interventions aimed at increasing the likelihood of flow at work need not differ on the basis of gender.

5.7 Theme 6 - Leadership emerges as a factor in executive flow experiences

5.7.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

Leadership emerges in the study as an important consideration in executive flow experiences. Executives described leadership activities as one of the flow-inducing types of work and they also indicated that their personal experience of being led by a strong leader impacts the likelihood of their flow experiences.

The leadership activities cited include activities of business leadership, getting others to buy into your vision, leading other people, and helping others see the vision and specifically serving others including supporting their team in getting to perform well. Executives described that leading an organisational turnaround, writing strategy, and putting in place organisational process/disciplines in creating a new business area created flow.

5.7.2 *Comparison to the literature*

The existing literature on flow recognises that areas such as dealing with conflict, meeting deadlines and achieving goals, planning meetings, negotiating with customers and learning new skills and roles, problem-solving, and evaluation activities are significant predictors of flow at work (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). There is no reference to these activities in the context of leadership nor to other leadership activities such as those emerging out of this study.

Bakker (2005) identified that supervisory coaching could positively impact the likelihood of flow experiences. Furthermore this body of literature on flow has also identified that “types of organisational climate orientation indicators” (Salanova et al., 2006, p. 16) of social support, innovation and clear rules would have a positive impact on the likelihood of a flow experience at work. Whilst the efficacy of the

leader can be assumed to be related to the organisational climate and more specifically to supervisory coaching, no direct reference to leadership is made.

5.7.3 *Conclusion*

The outcome of the study adds to the existing literature on flow by identifying that an additional activity of performing a leadership role may increase the likelihood of flow at work. It further provides guidance on a specific aspect of the organisational climate, namely, the efficacy of the leader under which the executive works, as a factor that influences flow. The latter finding thus offers a new focus area to consider when looking to develop interventions to increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences.

5.8 Theme 7 - Executives experience flow and anti-flow at work; these are caused and characterised by opposite experiences of one another

5.8.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

Every executive was able to describe times at work where they experienced flow and anti-flow. This was elicited through the phrases in the interview schedule asking the executives to reflect on times at work where they had an experience akin to the original description of flow and then that of anti-flow. The data illustrated that at all levels the responses of the executives when addressing anti-flow were mostly exactly opposite of those received for flow. This relationship is illustrated in the figure below.

Description of flow experience	Description of anti-flow experience
Flow experience is enjoyable	Anti-flow is not an enjoyable experience
Feel challenged by flow activity	Anti-flow is not boring, but frustrating or stressful
Feel challenged by flow activity	Anti-flow work was easy to do
Flow activity feels effortless	Difficult to perform anti-flow activity
Energy experienced during flow activity	Anti-flow activity saps energy



Opposite descriptor

Organisational conditions when flow is experienced	Organisational conditions when anti-flow is experienced
Empowered to perform work that causes flow	Anti-flow when feeling disempowered
Feeling valued at work links to flow experience	Anti-flow through belief in low impact of work
Flow in context of strong leader	Anti-flow in the context of poor leadership
Flow in context of clear outcomes	Anti-flow when required outcomes are unclear
Momentum at work enables flow	Anti-flow from organisational inability to get things done
Organisatonal and individual fit facilitates flow	Anti-flow when no organisational and individual fit
Team support is present in flow activity	Anti-flow from poor team support



Opposite descriptor

Figure 10. Illustration of opposite relationship between flow and anti-flow responses

Responses in this study on executive flow experiences also differed in terms of the description of anti-flow shared during the interview from existing literature, referring to anti-flow experiences as frustrating and stressful rather than boring.

5.8.2 *Comparison to the literature*

The description and insights into anti-flow in existing literature is contained in the study by Allison and Duncan (1988) into the flow experiences of women at work. This study highlighted the opposite experience of flow, termed anti-flow. The type of tasks that created anti-flow were identified as tedious, simple, and repetitive (p. 135), within situations of low control, low challenge, inadequate leadership, and, as predicted in the Flow state model depicted in Figure 1, resulted in boredom.

5.8.3 *Conclusion*

This study confirms the known description of anti-flow experiences, and extends current literature by providing an additional array of descriptors for anti-flow, its precursors and characteristics, and in the general applicability across men and women of anti-flow experiences. Furthermore, the results of this study reflect that contrary to the existing definition of anti-flow as boring (Allison & Duncan, 1988), executives experience anti-flow as stressful and frustrating. These new findings suggest a new area of focus for work enjoyment, and that is that the antecedents for flow are impactful for individuals not only for the possibility that they may foster flow at work, but now also to avoid the experience of anti-flow at work.

5.9 Theme 8 - Executives are able to proactively pursue flow

5.9.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The findings of the study identified that not only is it possible for executive flow experiences to be proactively pursued at work, but also that—in the executives' shared experiences—there are specific areas, which if addressed, that could foster flow at work.

A clear perspective emerging in the study was that executives can and have proactively sought out flow experiences. This theme emerged in specific examples where executives shared proactive actions taken to get to flow, including taking up a challenging activity, such as running marathons, doing different work, or focusing on energy management with a coach and looking at and engaging in activities found to be energising.

The responses provided by the executives, and the executive coaches on the advice they would provide to others to enable them to achieve flow suggests that the respondents to this study believe it is possible to proactively pursue flow experiences. Executives advised the pursuit of self-awareness by others for them to achieve flow. Additional advice to others was to seek a personal fit with the

organisation, pursue their passion and ensure that they were constantly moving forward. The executives suggested that others needed to understand where they held control and to get team support.

5.9.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Whilst the literature indicates that it should be possible to manipulate variables to foster conditions in support of flow (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010), there are no evidence-based examples in the existing literature of this type of proactive pursuit of flow experiences.

5.9.3 *Conclusion*

This conclusion corroborates the existing literature that indicates that conditions can be manipulated to increase the likelihood of flow (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). This study however extends current literature by providing evidence where executives have successfully purposefully pursued flow experiences. It is also of interest to this study's research question as evidence of flow being actively pursued may translate into an opportunity to apply coaching as an intervention to proactively pursue flow.

5.10 Theme 9 – Self-awareness may increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work

5.10.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The link between self-awareness and flow experiences is made in two different sets of data from the study. Executives indicated that not only is being self-aware an antecedent for their flow experience, but also that when proffering advice to others on how to achieve flow, they would advise them to become self-aware. Self-awareness in the context of the study refers to knowing oneself, with some respondents instituting weekly practices to retain this awareness.

A range of attributes are described in the data for self-awareness, from conceptual understanding of personal mastery to a more specific awareness of one's passions, strengths, skills, capabilities, and contribution.

5.10.2 *Comparison to the literature*

The closest link to self-awareness in the existing academic literature on flow refers to the loss of ego as one of the characteristics of a flow experience (M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). This is not the same experience as emerging from the study, which refers specifically to self-awareness as a precursor for flow rather than a characteristic of it. Individual resources, currently documented in the literature as one of the categories of facilitating factors for flow at work (Salanova et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2007) also does not reflect self-awareness as a factor. Suggestions in the literature around how to develop specific interventions to facilitate flow at work (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010) have not considered a focus on self-awareness.

The literature on coaching identifies the achievement of self-awareness as an outcome from coaching (Wales, 2002), and the role of Executive Coaching in emphasising executives' self-awareness was highlighted by Joo (2005). Moen and Kvalsund (2008) mentioned Executive Coaching as a tool for coachees to enhance their understanding of the self and of their work. No link is however established in the literature between achieving self-awareness through coaching and increasing the likelihood of flow at work.

5.10.3 *Conclusion*

The study has therefore extended current literature on flow at work by identifying self-awareness as an additional antecedent for flow. The implication is that the study may provide an additional factor around which interventions could be developed to increase the likelihood of flow at work. The existing literature on the relationship between coaching and self-awareness raises the possibility that

coaching could be an appropriate intervention to raise self-awareness specifically to the end of increasing the likelihood of flow. This possibility offers a new application for Executive Coaching.

5.11 Theme 10 - Likelihood of flow experiences may be increased by using personal strengths

5.11.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The study identifies a link between an individual's use of strengths and experiencing flow. This link refers not only to being aware of individual strengths as part of self-awareness, but also the opportunity to play to these strengths within the organisation and for a specific work activity. The data also revealed that executives felt confident in their ability to perform the activity during which they experienced flow. One of the executive coaches felt that raising an executive coachee's awareness of their strengths could increase the executive's awareness of flow experiences.

5.11.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Current flow literature indicates one of the key characteristics of a flow experience to be that the individual's level of skill is balanced with the challenge of the activity performed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a). There is however no documentation on the nature of the individual's skills or a link to strengths in the literature.

Existing literature on coaching recognises the emergence of a strengths-based coaching model that looks to harness the individual coachee's strengths to optimise personal outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2006). An assessment of the individual's strengths using well-documented tools (Linley & Harrington, 2006) is also suggested. There is however no link made between strengths-based coaching and flow experiences at work.

5.11.3 *Conclusion*

The study has thus extended existing literature on flow at work and coaching by identifying the possibility that a strengths-based coaching intervention could support the likelihood of executive flow experiences by enabling executives to be aware of and be able to apply their strengths at work.

5.12 Theme 11 - The three areas that impact executive flow experiences correlate to executive coaching focus areas

5.12.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The outcome of the study reflects that the scope of executive flow experiences covers the individual conditions that foster flow, the type of work performed when flow is experienced, and the organisational conditions when flow is experienced.

5.12.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Research studies on flow experiences in the workplace have identified three categories of facilitating factors for such experiences, namely, individual resources (Salanova et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2007), organisational resources (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010), and job resources (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Moneta, 2012).

The literature on coaching identifies the key defining aspects of Executive Coaching as the highly interpersonal one-on-one nature of these types of coaching interventions characterised by working on both organisational and personal issues (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Peterson, 1996; Stern, 2004).

5.12.3 *Conclusion*

This study confirms that—similar to documented flow experiences at work—executive flow experiences occur, and can potentially be invoked, at the three

levels of the individual, the organisation, and the type of work performed. These three areas are strongly correlated to the scope of Executive Coaching's dual focus between the executive and the organisation. It may be equally plausible for a typical Executive Coaching process to operate and consider the type of work being performed by the executive, creating a compelling overlap in scope between executive flow experiences at work and the realm of Executive Coaching. The implication is that Executive Coaching may be suitable as one of the interventions applied to manipulate variables to increase executive flow experiences at work.

5.13 Theme 12 – There are clear focus areas which could be manipulated through interventions to increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences

5.13.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The outcome of the study reflects clear precursors of executive flow experiences that could be manipulated to increase the likelihood of such experiences. These are grouped into the individual conditions that foster flow, the type of work performed when flow is experienced, advice executives offer to others to achieve flow, and organisational conditions when flow is experienced.

The data on individual conditions that foster executive flow experiences illustrated that executives felt self-aware and confident in their own skills level required for the activity. Individuals perceive flow experiences to be linked to individual meaning and purpose, and a view that their work has an influence or is making an impact. Executives felt that they were performing well, using their personal strengths and were fully accountable for the outcomes of the work delivered. Flow is supported by making a real connection with people.

This study showed that specific work activities during which flow was experienced required creativity or could be driven by the activity itself. Specific activities were

described with an individual variation, ranging from working with finances, doing analysis, and planning to generating ideas, working with technology, selling an idea, and creating something new. Flow was also described as being driven by leadership activities broadly, and more specifically from seeing people learn and grow. The activity itself was described in some cases as fostering flow.

The data indicated that a positive work context characterised by organisational and individual fit, strong leadership, team support and within which the executive felt valued described the organisational conditions under which flow was experienced. Executives were empowered to perform work, could gain momentum in their work and have clear outcomes.

5.13.2 *Comparison to the literature*

Existing flow research has accumulated some antecedents and characteristics of flow, and illustrated it is possible to manipulate flow in the workplace through addressing certain variables (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009).

Documented flow characteristics include losing track of time, where the sense of time is transformed. Goals are clear, and feedback on the outcome of the activity is immediate. The challenge of performing the work is matched to the person's skills, who experiences a feeling of focus and concentration the task. Everyday frustrations are removed from attention and there is a feeling of being in control of one's experience, on the edge between control and work coming too easily. A sense of self-consciousness and ego is lost, with reference to transcendence. The activity is enjoyable for its own sake, in other words an autotelic activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a).

The literature on fostering flow at work identifies the following conditions: a) Individual conditions are linked to a personal feeling of competence that may foster flow (Salanova et al., 2006), and b) a positive causal relationship with self-efficacy at the individual level, and social support, climate and clear goals at the organisational level (Salanova et al., 2006). The perception that one's work has

a positive impact on others has also been found to contribute to more regular flow experiences (Maeran & Cangiano, 2013).

Specific characteristics of work activities have been identified for flow at work, namely, absorption, intrinsic motivation, and enjoyment (Bakker, 2005). Precursors have also been identified at the level of the individual and the organisation (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). Antecedents of flow at work in the form of job resources, namely social support, supervisory coaching, autonomy, and feedback have been documented by Bakker (2005). Work activities predicting flow at work currently referenced in the literature are planning, problem-solving, and evaluation activities (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). Salanova et al. (2006) have reported that an ability to innovate at work has a positive impact on flow at work. Alison and Duncan (1988) have identified that women experience flow when interacting with others.

Person-environment matching is an organisational condition that has been identified as fostering flow at work (Moneta, 2012), whilst Hackman and Oldham (1976) have identified the motivational impact of knowing that your work is making an impact on others.

5.13.3 *Conclusion*

Despite there being a rich body of knowledge on causes of flow in the workplace this study identifies additional causes of flow at work. This extends the number of focus areas currently identified in the research which could be manipulated to increase the opportunity for executives to enjoy flow at work.

The additional antecedents identified by this study can be grouped for individual conditions, work activities, and organisational conditions that foster flow. Pursuing passion at work, being self-aware, and using personal strengths at work surfaced in this study as precursors to executive flow experiences. The additional work activities emerging were: working with finances, analysis, and idea

generation, working with technology, and selling an idea. Leadership activities and seeing people learn and grow were also identified through this research process.

It is possible that the additional causes for flow at work emanating from this study may only be applicable to individuals performing executive roles. The applicability to all individuals would need to be established through a further study. The additional causes of flow may also enable the development of new types of interventions that are suited to addressing these causal factors. For example, executive coaching is known to support increased self-awareness (Joo, 2005).

5.14 Theme 13 - Executive coaching process may be able to help cultivate conditions that increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work

5.14.1 *Manifestation of theme in the data*

The study identified several areas where Executive Coaching and flow may be linked. The executive coach respondents indicated that Executive Coaching could raise the executive coachee's awareness of flow at work by either following a process similar to that followed in this research study, of sharing a verbatim description of flow and exploring this with the coachee, or through inquiring and exploring where the executive enjoys work most. These respondents also indicated that Executive Coaching could increase executives' self-awareness, their awareness of their strengths and assist in garnering organisational support.

As mentioned in prior themes, executive respondents also indicated that they felt it was possible and in some cases they had already purposefully pursued flow at work.

5.14.2 *Comparison to literature*

Existing literature on flow indicates that conditions can be manipulated to increase the likelihood of flow (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010).

Current literature on coaching illustrates that Executive Coaching is a tool for coachees to enhance their understanding of their work (Moen & Kvalsund, 2008). Furthermore, the scope of coaching to address individual strengths is evident in the strengths-based coaching model that identifies and harnesses individual coachee's strengths to optimise personal outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Executive Coaching is able to elicit organisational feedback for coachees through its use of information from 360 degree feedback mechanisms from the colleagues, peers and/or employees of the executive (Wasylyshyn, 2003).

5.14.3 *Conclusion*

Executive coaching is identified as a possible tool to increase executive's awareness of their flow experiences, to enable certain known antecedents of flow experiences such as enabling the fit between the individual and the organisation or eliciting team support through known coaching tools. The study data provide guidance on the type of content a coaching programme could address to increase the likelihood of flow, and some suggested questions to be applied in the coaching process.

5.15 Conclusion

This chapter described the themes emerging from the data, linking them to an assessment of the respective relationships to existing literature and implications for the research question.

These themes are summarised within a framework derived from a combination of the existing literature on flow, and the outcomes of this study. The organisation

of the themes into this framework provides an integrated view of the link between the emerging themes of the study and flow.

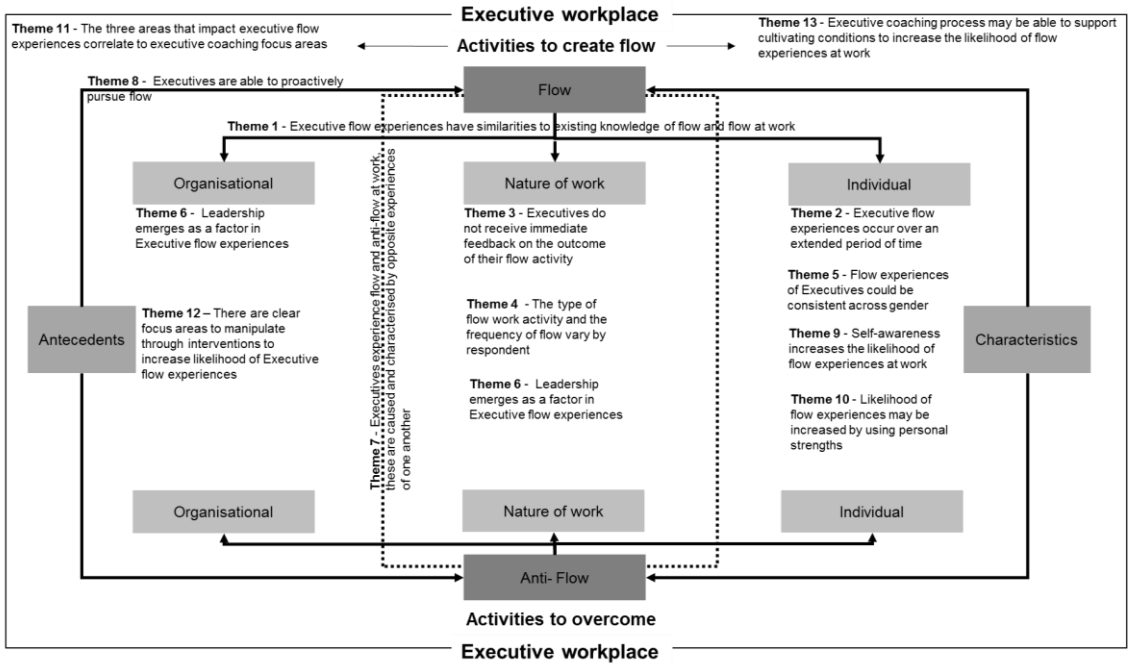


Figure 11. Organising framework to illustrate relationships between study themes and translate findings into an integrated understanding of study outcomes

This organising framework represents the themes emerging from the study and their relationship to one another. The framework is contextualised within executive workplaces, and illustrates the respective causes and characteristics of executive experiences of flow and anti-flow from the study outcomes.

The arrows between the antecedents and characteristic denote that both factors of flow have been identified in this research as feeding into executive flow experiences. The antecedents identified have a “means to an end” relationship to flow and anti-flow experiences, or represent a precursor for either to occur, whilst the evolving list of characteristics of flow and anti-flow hold an attributive relationship to the flow and anti-flow categories respectively. These necessary conditions for the occurrence of flow and anti-flow for executives and the typical characteristics of each category of experience have been identified at the three

levels, represented by the blocks for organisational, nature of work, and the individual linked to flow and anti-flow in the framework. The diametrically opposite relationship between flow and anti-flow is represented by the dotted line linking these two areas. Finally, possible activities that may increase the likelihood of flow or enable overcoming of anti-flow are illustrated in the framework.

Each of the themes discussed in this chapter have been translated into this framework, providing an integrated perspective on the outcomes of the study. Theme 1 considers all the areas where executive flow experiences have been identified in the study, and introduces the relationship to existing knowledge of flow in the literature. Themes 2 and 5 outline characteristics of executive flow experiences at the level of the individual, whilst Themes 9 and 10 describe individual antecedents of these flow experiences. The possible attributes of executive flow identified in the study pertaining to the nature of the work are contained in Themes 3 and 4, whilst Theme 6 includes the antecedents for flow in terms of the nature of work performed. Theme 6 is also potentially applicable as an antecedent to executive flow at the organisational level. Theme 7 encapsulates the identified opposite relationship between flow and anti-flow in executive workplaces. Theme 8 is positioned in support of the antecedents for flow since it outlines how executives are proactively able to pursue such experiences. Theme 12 is associated with the antecedents to flow as it has identified specific areas that can be manipulated to increase the likelihood of flow. Finally, Themes 11 and 13 are linked to activities to create flow, as both themes provide a link to the manner in which a coaching activity may be able to foster executive flow experiences.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Addressing the research questions

The main objective of the study was to explore how Executive Coaching can facilitate creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces. To this end the key sub-questions considered are reflected below.

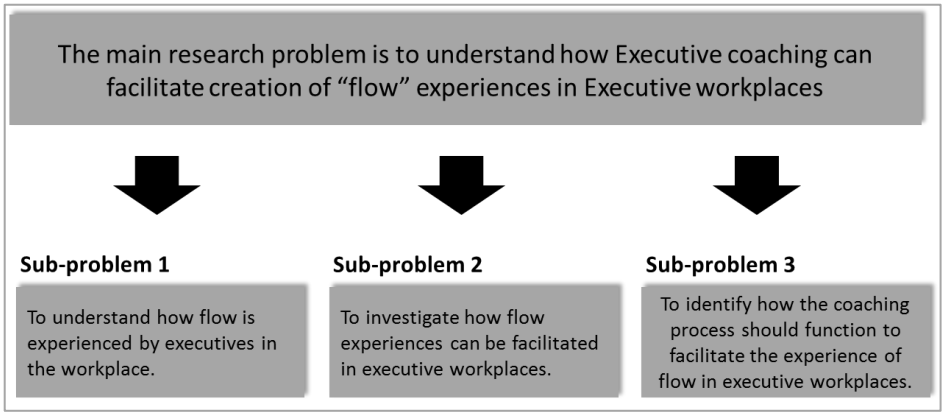


Figure 12. Conceptual view of main study research questions

This section indicates how the findings of the study address the sub-problems.

6.2 Sub-problem 1 – Understanding how flow is experienced by executives in the workplace

The findings of the study confirm that executive flow experiences show similarities to the known characteristics of flow, and flow at work.

These known characteristics of flow are: clear goals; a skills-challenge balance with the work; and focus and concentration on the task. This study identified that executives feel in control of their experience and the activity may be autotelic. These characteristics are described by the original flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a). This study did not explicitly identify original flow characteristics—the removal of everyday frustrations and nor the loss of ego—during flow as typical

in executive flow experiences. Executive flow experiences emerging from this study did not support the original flow characteristic that feedback on the flow activity is immediate in that it found that executives typically did not rely on immediate feedback to enjoy a work activity that they described as a flow experience.

The study outcomes did identify that executive flow experiences at work do reflect some of the existing characteristics contained within the literature. Executive flow experiences are found to occur at the same three levels documented in existing literature on flow experiences at work and which are attributed to individual, organisations, and job resources (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Moneta, 2012; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Salanova et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2007). This manifests in the description of executive flow experiences at three different levels, the level of the individual experience, organisational conditions present during flow, and related to the type of work being performed.

Executives experience the antecedents for flow at work as identified by Bakker (2005). This study's data further reveal that executives experience absorption, intrinsic motivation, and enjoyment during flow experiences at work, also predicted by Bakker in the seminal definition of flow at work (2005). The findings that self-efficacy supports work flow experiences (Salanova et al., 2006) are supported in executive flow experiences. A possible link between strengths knowledge and well-being as documented by Govindji and Linley (2007), emerges in this study as a direct link between flow and strengths.

Specific existing literature related to flow at work is confirmed as applicable to executives, from Moneta's findings that a match between the environment and the person supports flow (2012) to the outcome of Hackman and Oldham's JCM study (1976) that indicated that motivation is positively impacted when the work performed is seen to have an impact on others (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The positive link between innovation at work and the occurrence of flow (Salanova et al., 2006) is evidenced in this study's finding that creativity fosters flow. The

description of anti-flow by Allison and Duncan (1988) as occurring when challenge and control are lacking is reflected in executive flow experiences.

This study has however also indicated that executive flow experiences are different from existing knowledge on flow. The results of the study indicate that executive flow experiences occur over an extended period of time, not a “peak short term experience” as described in existing flow literature (Bakker, 2005, p. 401). This finding is however juxtaposed with the executives still describing flow at a task level, which is related to the short term nature of flow at work. One of the respondents to this study did not receive any feedback during the flow experience. Executives indicated that feedback was received both from the activity itself, as theorised by Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) or from the team and people around the Executive, as postulated in the Job Characteristics Model, which has been found to have a positive link to flow at work (Demerouti, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

The distinction between the factors giving rise to flow for men and women at work as identified by Bryce and Haworth (2002) is challenged by the findings in this study which found that flow experiences of executives tend to be consistent across gender. The respondent pool for this study was made up of equal numbers of men and women, and no distinction emerged in the flow experiences of the respective groups. Whilst the results of this study concur that executives also experience flow from interacting or connecting with others (Allison & Duncan, 1988), the outcomes of this study extend that to male executives as well, whereas previous research only identified this for women at work.

Another extension on existing literature—which listed planning, problem-solving, and evaluation activities as predictors of flow (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010)—is in the additional work activities this study identified as linked to flow, including a perspective that flow is not specifically linked to any activity.

The description and insights into anti-flow in existing literature by Allison and Duncan (1988) which looked into anti-flow as it pertains to women is extended in this study by the array of descriptors for anti-flow, its precursors and characteristics, and in the general applicability across men and women. Furthermore, the results of this study reflect that contrary to the existing definition of anti-flow as boring (Allison & Duncan, 1988), executives experienced anti-flow as stressful and frustrating.

The executive responses reflected some deviations from the verbatim description of flow in existing literature used in the respondent questionnaire (Bakker, 2005). The first difference relates to the duration of the flow experience as already discussed above.

The outcomes of this study on executive flow experiences confirm the initial descriptors of anti-flow as occurring in situations with low control, low challenge and inadequate leadership, compounded into boredom (Allison & Duncan, 1988).

These existing descriptors of the anti-flow experience at work have been enriched through the understanding of executive anti-flow experiences, their causes, and characteristics. The applicability of anti-flow to both men and women further adds to the existing knowledge on anti-flow that had only focused on women. A final extension of existing knowledge of flow through the understanding of executive anti-flow experiences has been the addition of stress experiences to the anti-flow experience.

The type of work flow activity and frequency of flow was found to vary across respondents. This study on executive flow experiences found that whilst some activities performed during the flow experience were common across individuals, an array of newly identified, varying activities across the executive respondent pool also emerged. Similarly the frequency of flow differed across executives. This confirmed the subjective and personal nature of a flow experience.

6.3 Sub-problem 2 – To investigate how flow experiences can be facilitated in executive workplaces

This study outcome determined that executives believe it possible to proactively pursue flow experiences, including evidence of instances where executives have actually pursued specific activities to increase enjoyment and flow at work. This study outcome supports existing literature on flow at work that acknowledges that manipulating variables may foster flow at work (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). The current literature is also extended by the understanding of executive flow experiences through the identification of evidence to support that manipulation of conditions does foster flow in practice.

This study has further corroborated certain known antecedents of flow experiences at work, confirming that these are also applicable to executives. This list has been extended through this study, eliciting additional causes of flow at work for executives. The number of known focus areas that can be manipulated to foster increased executive flow experiences have thus been increased through this study.

These causal factors have been identified at the level of the individual, the organisational context within which flow occurs, and linked to the type of work activity being performed. The various actions and focus areas shared by executives as advice to achieve flow are also possible factors which can increase flow experiences.

The respective antecedents of executive flow experiences as identified in the data analysis are tabulated below.

Individual conditions that foster flow	Type of work performed when flow is experienced
Confident in skills	Creativity
Meaningful work	Finances
Feeling of doing good work	Analysis
Connecting with people	Creating something new
Having influence or making impact	Idea generation
Perceied accountability	Planning
Purposeful work	Leading people
Pursuing passion at work	Selling an idea
Self-awareness	Working with technology
Using of personal strengths	Leadeship activities
Advice to achieve flow	**Organisational conditions when flow is experienced**
Get momentum in work	Empowerment
Ensure personal fit with organisation	Feeling valued
Establish and understand where hold control	Strong leadership
Enlist team support	Clear outcomes
Harness your passion	Momentum
Be self-aware	Organisational and individual fit
	Positive work context
	Team support

Figure 13. Antecedents of executive flow identified in this study that may be manipulated to increase likelihood of flow experiences

Self-awareness is identified as a precursor of executive flow experiences in this study, extending current literature on flow that had not previously considered this area. This awareness is described as understanding of individual personal mastery, and more specifically as cultivating an awareness of individual passions, strengths, skills, capabilities and contribution made.

It has further been identified that using personal strengths at work may increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences. The study links an awareness of and ability to play to individual strengths with executive flow experiences. This finding extends existing literature on flow at work that contains no consideration of individual strengths as a factor influencing flow experiences.

Leadership has emerged as a factor in executive flow experiences. There is however no specific reference to leadership activities or the leadership experienced within the organisation within the existing literature on flow at work. Both these elements of leadership have however emerged as pertinent to executive flow experiences. It is feasible that both these aspects of leadership should be considered when looking to facilitate executive flow experiences.

6.4 Sub-problem 3 – To identify how the coaching process should function to facilitate the experience of flow by executives in the workplace

The three areas that impact executive flow experiences correlate to documented Executive Coaching focus areas. The study identified that executive flow experiences occur, and can thus potentially be invoked, at the three levels of the individual, the organisation, and the type of work performed. This is strongly correlated to the scope of Executive Coaching which holds a dual focus between the executive and their organisation (Stern, 2004). It is also possible for the Executive Coaching process to consider the type of work being performed by the executive, creating a compelling overlap in scope between executive flow experiences at work and the realm of Executive Coaching. As a practice, Executive Coaching encompasses a similar scope as the study found for executive flow experiences, namely, the individual, organisation, and nature of work.

The outcomes of the study suggest that the Executive Coaching process may be able to support the executive in cultivating the respective individual, organisational, and work conditions required to increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work. Existing literature on flow recognises that conditions identified to support flow can be manipulated to increase the likelihood of flow (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). This research study on executive flow experiences has identified certain content areas which, if supported or enabled through an appropriate intervention, could better enable executives to experience flow at work. The identification of the overlap between the scope of Executive Coaching and the identified antecedents of flow suggests that Executive Coaching may be one of the interventions well suited to manipulate these conditions to support increased flow experiences. The antecedents of flow at the level of the individual, the organisation, and the type of work performed have been assessed and it is suggested that these can be effectively addressed through Executive Coaching.

6.5 Possible model to depict how Executive Coaching can facilitate the creation of flow experiences in executive workplaces

The study has identified several possible areas for coaching to support executive flow experiences at work. A possible model to depict this is outlined below.

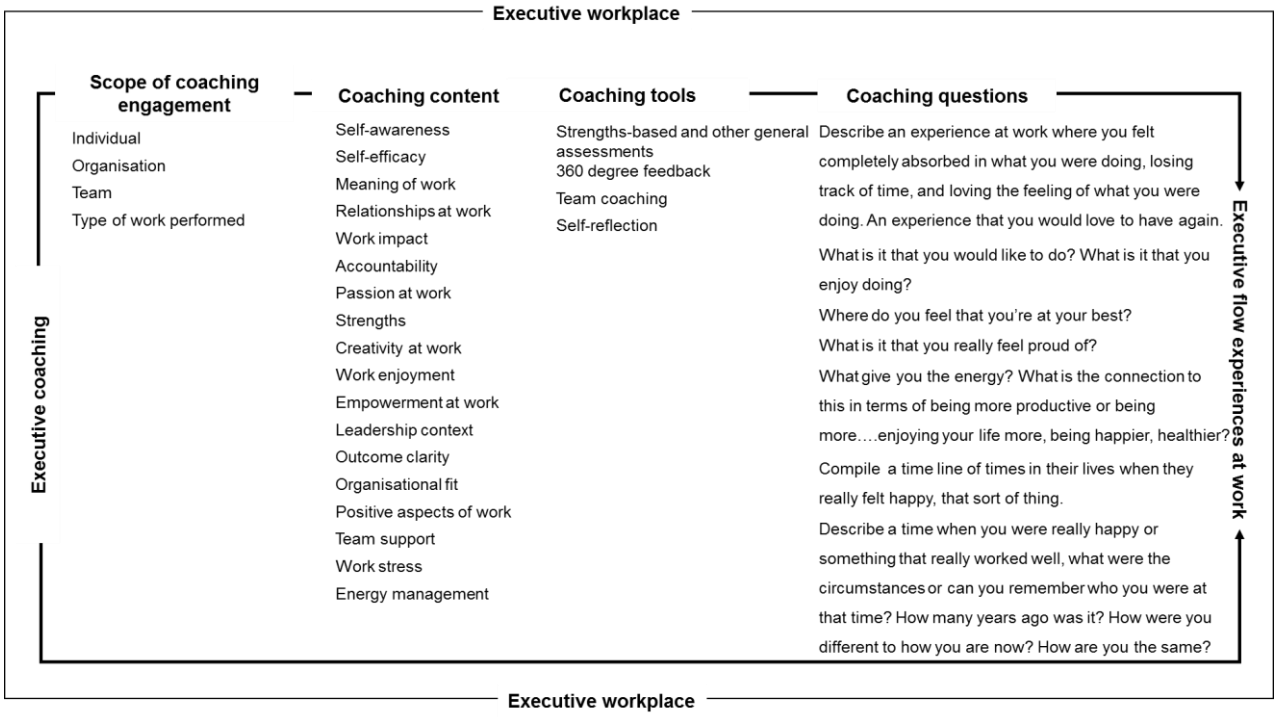


Figure 14.Possible coaching model to increase likelihood of executive flow experiences at work

The overarching elements of the suggested model integrate the finding of this study on executive flow experiences at work with literature on Executive coaching to show how it may be possible to use Executive Coaching as a tool within executive workplace situations to positively impact the occurrence of flow experiences at work. The model applies the outcomes from this study to suggest the scope, content, tools, and possible questions that could be deployed to increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences at work.

6.5.1 *The potential scope of the possible coaching engagement based on understanding of executive coaching experiences*

The proposed scope for coaching would encapsulate the three levels at which executive flow experiences have been described in the study, namely, the individual, type of work, and the organisation. This implies that the participants in the coaching process could include not only the executive, but also their teams, which could be comprised of their line managers, peers, and subordinates. It further suggests that the coaching process could consider elements of the type of work being performed by the executive.

6.5.2 *Coaching content*

It is possible that by honing in on the causes of flow, and the opposite experience of anti-flow, executives could increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work. Sharing the typical actions that have been provided as advice to achieve flow by executives in the study may achieve a similar outcome.

The proposed model has assessed these aforementioned data elements from the study to derive possible content areas to focus on in the coaching process to support the increased likelihood of executive flow experiences.

6.5.3 *Coaching tools*

The research points to some appropriate, known coaching tools which could be used during Executive Coaching, as listed below.

The appropriate application of coaching questions, with suggestions emerging from the findings of this study listed below, may raise the executives' awareness of their flow experiences. Organisational support could potentially be garnered in support of executive flow experiences through the administration and debriefing of a feedback process by the coach, using the well documented 360 degree feedback tool (Wasylyshyn, 2003). This could cover the scope subscribed to in

this framework, and obtain input from the executive's line manager, peers, and subordinates. The coach can subsequently work with the coachee to assess the degree of organisational support offered by this organisational network. A team coaching intervention as part of the Executive Coaching process, as suggested by De Vries (2005), may also enhance the executive's experience of team support.

Linley and Harrington (2006) recommend that an assessment of the individual's strengths using well-documented assessment tools is an effective approach to work with coaching clients to develop an awareness and ability to apply their strengths. This is an outcome that the findings of this study suggest can improve the likelihood of executive flow experiences.

Existing literature on coaching reflects that coachee self-awareness is enhanced through the coaching process itself, suggesting that coaching questions could be adequate tools to address this flow antecedent. The art of self-reflection is another well documented coaching tool to improve self-awareness (Stelter et al., 2010).

6.5.4 *Coaching questions*

The proposed model for Executive Coaching that may increase the likelihood of executive flow experiences at work provides an illustrative list of coaching questions that could support this outcome. These questions were compiled using the various data sources from within this study, as outlined below:

It emerged during the interview process that the approach adopted within the interview schedule for the study—sharing the verbatim description of flow with the interview respondents—created an awareness of flow experiences that could be drawn on in support of enabling flow.

One of the Executive Coaches reflected that using questions similar to those used in the interviews could be helpful in general within a coaching situation.

Specific questions that respondents felt could be used to address areas that could assist executive coaching clients to achieve flow are reflected in the summarised quotations from the study listed below.

6.6 Implications for key stakeholders

6.6.1 *Executives*

Executives may be able to use the information provided in this study to proactively and independently pursue flow experiences at work and possibly enjoy a greater sense of individual well-being (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Wright et al., 2007). This study provides confirmation of the occurrence of executive flow experiences at work, including insight into some causes and characteristics of such experiences. Achieving increased flow experiences at work offers the possibility for executives to enjoy the positive personal outcomes of enjoyment, contentment, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction associated with flow at work (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Positive performance outcomes may also be facilitated through this focus (Bakker, 2005; Demerouti, 2006; Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). Effective pursuit of increased flow experiences may generate self-efficacy and future organisational resources for executives (Salanova et al., 2006).

6.6.2 *Executive coaches*

The possible use of the Executive Coaching process to increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work provides an additional outcome for executive coaches to pursue with executive coaching clients. This pursuit could empower executives to achieve the outcomes outlined in point 6.6.1 above. An additional focus on flow experiences may also open up new coaching clients for executive coaches who may currently be more focused on performance coaching.

6.6.3 *Human Resource practitioners*

The outcomes of this study provide an insight for Human Resource practitioners to consider and apply in leadership development broadly, and specifically with executives. The ability for flow to be passed on to others (Bakker, 2005) positions the pursuit of executive flow experiences as an effective mechanism to support Organisational Development or culture optimisation interventions. Such a focus may support desirable workplace outcomes of innovation, energy, and skills (Britton, 2008). The ability for flow experiences to generate positive outcomes at both the individual and organisational level (Salanova et al., 2006) would increase the usefulness of flow experiences in the workplace. Human Resource practitioners could also engage with executive coaches to develop appropriate interventions to this end.

6.7 Contribution of the study

This study has added to the existing body of knowledge on flow at work by adding insights on the nuances of flow experiences at work for executives. It has shown that executives may not experience flow as a short term experience, but rather over a longer period of time; that executive men and women experience flow in a similar way; and that executives do not necessarily require immediate feedback on an activity to experience flow. The study further extends the list of work activities during which flow is experienced for executives, and describes the anti-flow experience at a more granular level. The outcomes of this research process imply that anti-flow is experienced by men and women. It also showed that the flow antecedent of having a connection with people applied equally to men and women. Additionally, the study findings submit an opposite relationship between flow and anti-flow as experienced by executives.

The findings of this study suggest a link between executive flow and coaching at a more detailed level than existing mainstream and academic literature on the topic. These findings propose an alternative application for Executive Coaching

in supporting and guiding executives to increase their likelihood of flow at work. It is the author's hope that this finding ignites a focus on and germination of executive flow experiences that can embrace the contagion of flow identified by Bakker (2005) and the role of executives as climate engineers to engender an increased likelihood of flow across organisations with a positive upward spiral (Fredrickson, 2001) to society at large.

6.8 Limitations of the study

The potential areas in which the study may have been limited were outlined in the Research methodology chapter. The following specific limitations have emerged for consideration out of the study.

6.8.1 *Limitations applicable to qualitative research and implications on study*

The possibility that the personal attributes and perceptions of the researcher had an impact on the outcome of this study—a possibility documented by Creswell et al. (2007), and characteristic of the interpretivist research paradigm applied in this study—may have been applicable as the researcher was personally known to each of the respondents and had numerous other interactions with them on different occasions.

This may challenge the objectivity of the outcome and prevent the ability to replicate the study outcomes. Generalisability of the study outcomes may be impacted.

The purposive sampling approach was successfully adopted in the study, achieving a diverse range of participants across demographics and industries. The only limiting factor that arose from the sample was that the majority of the respondents were marketing executives or alternatively involved in work with a high creativity requirement, which may have caused a bias in the findings. Although it was not possible to ensure that the sample included individuals that

had actually experienced flow, all respondents were able to share flow experiences.

The ability to capture thick descriptions to improve the reliability of the study was hampered by the fact that only two interviews took place in the executive's office. All the other executives worked in open plan spaces, such that the actual workplace of the executive could not be observed. All executive respondents described a flow experience from a time other than the current role further eliminating the value of including the current work environment in the observations.

6.8.2 *Specific limitations previously identified in studies of flow experiences*

The qualitative research method applied in this study introduced the possibility of recall bias to the study (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) since it relied on retrospective analysis of flow experiences by participants. The study findings may thus be limited by the quality of the subjective recall of the executives of their historical flow experiences.

6.9 Future research

This study provided some insight into executive flow and anti-flow experiences at work, elucidating the antecedents and characteristics of both. These findings have been linked to the existing literature on coaching, and subsequently formulated into a coaching approach that could potentially increase the likelihood of flow in the workplace, with the intention of confirming the possibility of coaching for flow. To this end an extension of this study to test the efficacy of the proposed Executive Coaching model and its ability to enhance the possibility of executive flow experiences would be beneficial.

Some the limitations to the outcome of this study could be addressed through the extension of these outcomes into certain of the existing instruments for measuring

flow. For example, the Flow scale (M Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Mayers, 1978) could be adapted to ratify and measure the identified dimensions of executive flow experiences out of this study. The findings on anti-flow emerging from this study could be verified through the application of the Enhanced Flow Questionnaire (Allison & Duncan, 1987) to a sample of executives. The weakness of this study's reliance on historical recall could be overcome through the application of the Experience Sampling Method to a sample of executives in order to extract experiences as they take place.

A role for strengths–based interventions assessments and adopting a strengths based coaching approach are suggested by this study's findings. There may be an opportunity to assess the correlation between this approach to coaching and the incidence of executive flow experiences, and the characteristic of flow that is most impacted, such as for example, the support of strengths interventions in addressing the skills-challenge component of flow.

The findings of this study provided greater insight into anti-flow experiences by recording those of executives across many demographic factors. There is however no academic evidence to indicate whether overcoming anti-flow at work would increase the likelihood of flow experiences. It would thus be helpful to ascertain how overcoming anti-flow impacts flow experiences.

The interrelationship between executive flow experiences and the impact these have on the employees working for the executives would extend the evidence-based knowledge on the possibility of pursuing flow experiences to enhance organisational climate more broadly.

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APPENDIX A

Actual Research Instruments

Discussion Guide V1: Executive flow experiences at work

1. Introduction

- Introduce self, MMBEC.
- Review purpose of study, explain method of data capture and analysis.
- Confidentiality and anonymity, contract.
- Estimated completion time.
- Benefits to respondent.

2. Flow experiences at work

- Describe an experience at work where you felt completely absorbed in what you were doing, losing track of time, and loving the feeling of what you were doing. An experience that you would love to have again.
  - What makes it start?
  - Personal attributes:
    - How did you feel?
    - What makes it stop?
    - How often do you have this experience?
  - Work attributes:
    - Tell me about the goals/outcome you were working towards.
    - How free were you to decide what needed to be done when you experienced this? (Autonomy)
    - Tell me about support required and received from your colleagues. (Social support)
    - How did you know that you were on track in reaching your goal, or heading in the right direction?
    - Please share your general levels of job satisfaction with the role you were in when you had this experience.
    - Tell me about where you were in the organisational context.

- What work activities were you doing? Eg problem-solving, planning etc
- Describe how easy it was for you to do this activity?

3. Anti-flow experiences at work

- Describe the last time you felt bored or disinterested at work.
- Personal attributes:
  - How did you feel?
- Work attributes:
  - Tell me about the goals/outcome you were working towards.
  - What work activities were you doing?
  - Describe how easy it was for you to do this activity?

4. Proactively pursuing flow experiences at work

- What do you do to decrease the feeling of boredom described.
- If you were guiding someone to achieve the feeling of flow/enjoyment, what would you advise them to do?

5. Scenarios of flow

- Description read to respondent:
  - ‘‘Perhaps you know this special feeling that everything suddenly seems to go by itself. You are so concentrated on your task that you forget everybody and everything around you. Time flies without noticing it. You can concentrate effortlessly, everything goes smoothly, and you really enjoy what you do. You know exactly where you want to go, and you have the feeling of total control. Nothing seems to be able to stop you, and you are totally immersed in what you are doing. In a way, you have the feeling that you coincide with the activity at hand. At that moment, simply nothing else exists. You feel as if in another reality and that is a very enjoyable experience” (Bakker, 2008, p. 407)
- How does this compare to what you described earlier?

6. Any other comments? Anything not asked?

Discussion Guide V1: Executive coaches on executive flow experiences at work

1. Introduction

- Introduce self, MMBEC.
- Review purpose of study, explain method of data capture and analysis.
- Confidentiality and anonymity, contract.
- Estimated completion time.
- Benefits to respondent.

2. Flow experiences

- Familiarity with concept of flow.
- Refer to table with summary of definitions of flow below (Novak & Hoffman, 1997, pp. 3-4).
- Share Bakker and Flow at work (Bakker, 2008).

6. Executive flow experiences at work

- Please share with me how you think executives are able to achieve flow at work.
- How do you feel organisations can support flow experiences?

7. Coaching and flow

- How do you think the Executive Coaching process can foster executive flow experiences at work?
    - At level of the individual.
    - At level of the organisation.

- How do you think the Executive Coaching process can foster executive flow experiences through different coaching stages?

8. Proactively pursuing flow experiences at work

- Tell me about the approach you typically take/would take in guiding a coachee to enjoy work more/increased job satisfaction.

9. Scenarios of flow

- Description read to respondent:
    - ‘‘Perhaps you know this special feeling that everything suddenly seems to go by itself. You are so concentrated on your task that you forget everybody and everything around you. Time flies without noticing it. You can concentrate effortlessly, everything goes smoothly, and you really enjoy what you do. You know exactly where you want to go, and you have the feeling of total control. Nothing seems to be able to stop you, and you are totally immersed in what you are doing. In a way, you have the feeling that you coincide with the activity at hand. At that moment, simply nothing else exists. You feel as if in another reality and that is a very enjoyable experience’(Bakker, 2008, p. 407)
- If you were guiding a coachee to achieve this feeling of flow/enjoyment, what would you advise them to do?

10. Any other comments? Anything not asked?

Definitions of flow to illustrate the experience to coaches (Novak & Hoffman, 1997, pp. 3-4)

Reference:	Conceptual or Operational Definition:
Csikszentmihalyi (1977)	"the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (p36) when in the flow state "players shift into a common mode of experience when they become absorbed in their activity. This mode is characterized by a narrowing of the focus of awareness, so that irrelevant perceptions and thoughts are filtered out; by loss of self-consciousness; by a responsiveness to clear goals and unambiguous feedback; and by a sense of control over the environment...it is this common flow experience that people adduce as the main reason for performing the activity" (p72)
Privette and Bundrick (1987)	"Flow..., defined as an intrinsically enjoyable experience, is similar to both peak experience and peak performance, as it shares the enjoyment of valuing of peak experience and the behavior of peak performance. Flow *per se* does not imply optimal joy or performance but may include either or both." [p316]
Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988)	"The flow experience begins only when challenges and skills *are above a certain level,* and are in balance." [p260]
Mannell, Zuzanek, and Larson (1988)	"Csikszentmihalyi (1975) describes the flow experience as 'one of complete involvement of the actor with his activity' (p. 36), and he has identified a number of elements that are indicators of its occurrence and intensity. These indicators include: the perception that personal skills and the challenges provided by an activity are imbalance, centering of attention, loss of self-consciousness, unambiguous feedback to a person's actions, feelings of control over actions and environment, and momentary loss of anxiety and constraint, and enjoyment or pleasure." [p291] "Flow was operationalized by measuring the affect, potency, concentration, and the perception of a skill/challenge balance ." [p292]
Massimini and Carli (1988)	congruent skills and challenges that are above each subject's average weekly levels
LeFevre (1988)	"a balanced ratio of challenges to skills above average weekly levels" (p307)
Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989)	"When both challenges and skills are high, the person is not only enjoying the moment, but is also stretching his or her capabilities with the likelihood of learning new skills and increasing self-esteem and personal complexity. This process of optimal experience has been called flow."
Csikszentmihalyi (1990)	we feel "in control of our actions, masters of our own fate...we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment" (p3) "the state in which people are so intensely involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it."

Ghani, Supnick and Rooney (1991)	"two key characteristics of flow: the total concentration in an activity and the enjoyment which one derives from an activity...the precondition for flow is a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and skills a person brings to it" (p230) "a related factor is the sense of control over one's environment" (p231)
Trevino and Webster (1992)	"flow characterizes the perceived interaction with CMC technologies as more or less playful and exploratory"..Flow theory suggests that involvement in a playful, exploratory experience - the flow state - is self-motivating because it is pleasurable and encourages repetition. Flow is a continuous variable ranging from none to intense." [p540] "Flow represents the extent to which (a) the user perceives a sense of control over the computer interaction, (b) the user perceives that his or her attention is focused on the interaction, (c) the user's curiosity is aroused during the interaction, and (d) the user finds the interaction intrinsically interesting.." [p542]
Webster, Trevino and Ryan (1993)	"the flow state is characterized by four dimensions...(a) the user perceives a sense of control over the computer interaction, (b) the user perceives that his or her attention is focused on the interaction, (c) the user's curiosity is aroused during the interaction, and (d) the user finds the interaction intrinsically interesting. [p413]
Clarke and Haworth (1994)	"the subjective experience that accompanies performance in a situation where the challenges are matched by the person's skills. Descriptions of the feeling of 'flow' indicate an experience that is totally satisfying beyond a sense of having fun." [p511]
Ellis, Voelkl and Morris (1994)	"..an optimal experience that stems from peoples' perceptions of challenges and skills in given situations. Situations in which challenges and skills are perceived to be equivalent are thought to facilitate the emergence of such indicators of flow as positive affect and high levels of arousal, intrinsic motivation, and perceived freedom" [p337]
Ghani and Deshpande (1994)	"The two key characteristics of flow are (a) total concentration in an activity and (b) the enjoyment which one derives from an activity...There is an optimum level of challenge relative to a certain skill level. ...A second factor affecting the experience of flow is a sense of control over one's environment." [p383]
Lutz and Guiry 1994	"Psychologists use the term 'flow' to describe a state of mind sometimes experienced by people who are deeply involved in some event, object or activity...they are completely and totally immersed in it...Indeed, time may seem to stand still and nothing else seems to matter while engaged in the consump†ion event." [from respondent instructions]
Hoffman and Novak (1996)	"the state occurring during network navigation which is 1) characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity, 2) intrinsically enjoyable, 3) accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness, and 4) self-reinforcing"

APPENDIX B

Consistency matrix

Sub-Problem	Literature Review	Hypotheses or Propositions or Research questions	Data collection tool	Analysis
To understand how flow is experienced by executives in the workplace	(M Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a) (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989) (Bryce & Haworth, 2002) (Bakker, 2005) (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010)	What is flow? How is flow experienced by executives in the workplace?	Discussion Guide: Executive flow experiences at work – Questions 2 & 5 Discussion Guide: Executive coaches on executive flow experiences at work – Question 3	Inductive analysis
To investigate how flow experiences can be facilitated in executive workplaces	(Hackman & Oldham, 1976) (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008) (Stein et al., 1995) (Kowal & Fortier, 1999) (Bryce & Haworth, 2002) (Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst, 2001) (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010)	How can flow experiences be actively created? What are the specific job related factors that influence flow experiences? How does organisational context impact upon flow experiences? What type of work activities foster flow experiences?	Discussion Guide: Executive flow experiences at work – Questions 3 & 4 Discussion Guide: Executive coaches on executive flow experiences at work – Questions 7 & 8	Inductive analysis

Sub-Problem	Literature Review	Hypotheses or Propositions or Research questions	Data collection tool	Analysis
To identify how the coaching process should function to facilitate the experience of flow in executive workplaces	(Wesson & Boniwell, 2007) (Joo, 2005) (Grant et al., 2010) (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008) (Britton, 2008)	What type of coaching approach is suited to attributes of executive flow? How can coaching process adapt to promote flow experiences at work?	Discussion Guide: Executive coaches on executive flow experiences at work Questions 4 – 6	

APPENDIX C

Sample extracts from interview transcripts

Participant 11

So if you could please describe an experience at work where you've felt completely absorbed in what you were doing, losing track of time, loving the feeling of what you were doing, an experience that you would love to have again

Does it have to be […….]?

No, no, please, anytime

The truth being I haven't experienced that much at [……...] so it will be hard, at [……..] I haven't experienced it that much. But at [……] and at [……..] I had that experience. At [……..] it was before world cup 2010, so we were planning for world cup 2010 and we came up with ideas of how we can use football as a tool for social change at a profit. And we came up with ideas like build a […….] […….] centre which still stands. As like, how do you develop kids? How do you partner, use sport for HIV aids, use sport for education, use football for....and it was amazing for me because for once we were making money but it was soulful money. And we were doing stuff that was soulful because I could....even now when I pass Soweto I look and I go, oh, there's the […….] football...and I know that we had to pitch for that idea

Yes

And even now when there's now people doing [……] run […….], we pitched for that idea. Now people run it as if like it never existed before, but we pitched for those. And the intention behind all of those ideas was soulful. So we worked on weekends, we had to go and meet government officials, we had to be patient with government officials, we had to be patient with sporting bodies, we had to be patient with levels of incompetence and competence across all spectrums. But it was really amazing, because it was just...you could see the end and also you could see that if we pull this off, you're going to leave a legacy that, it's you and you job. Even when you've left you can still.....

It's the same for […….], […….] has this [……..] leaving sustainability plan and the whole idea was when I looked after the foods business, it was how do we...90% of [……..] vegetables are imported instead of being locally sourced

Ok

To make soups and all. So the vision was how do we make sure that 90% are locally sourced, and for that to happen you need to grow the agriculture, small holding farmers. How do you create more co-operators, how do you make sure that you create from soil to plate is South African?

And from that you can create jobs, you can empower women, agriculture, you can also create processing plants in South Africa so that they don't have to go.....

So by the time you've done this whole thing, you've not only been able to make bold claims on [……..] soup, because now it's fresh because from soil to factory is short. So the nutritional content is high, the taste is better, so you may claim to make money, […..] loads of money, but at the same time you've created jobs, you've created employment, you're entrepreneurs, you make people money. Then you multiply the effect of one person serving 5,10 families.

So at the end when you look back at it you're like, wow. We are capitalists but we are capitalists with a heart.

Ya, awesome

So that for me I would go with those two I can remember.

<u>Participant 7</u>

So I want to juxtapose the feeling against a feeling of anti- flow which there is, and it's interesting you started introducing it yourself but specifically to ask you in a similar manner to describe the last time you felt bored or disinterested at work or even particularly anxious. Talk to me a bit about that

So actually on […….] I was out of flow because I was bored, not that I was bored, in 3 months I fixed everything that needed to be fixed on it because it was a little bit too...you know and that's because of the experience I had had on [……] and I'd learnt a lot about leadership as well.

Yes

So I was able to put the right people in the right places, get rid of the....so I was able to in 3 months basically change my agency, change the team if I needed to, put it back on a growing path and then I was like..... and then I started running actually.

(laughter)

So I started running because I felt I needed a challenge, and I did the 2 oceans Ultra.

Fantastic

So I realised I was out of flow because I was a little bit bored and so what ended up happening with all this training was that I had to cram a lot of stuff in a very short time and I had to be really efficient and effective and that gave it back a little bit of excitement, so that was that. And I suppose now I feel anxious because this is a much bigger job, there's a lot more politics at play and actually my role is more of a cross functional business role and less of a marketing role. Although I head up marketing and I need to make sure that marketing delivers, but I need to influence the rest of the business about marketing and I don't know how to do that well enough yet.

And if you're choosing either one of those examples, what would you do to decrease the feeling either of boredom or anxiety

so I suppose the boredom what I did is I found a challenge outside of work that I could do and then I kind of...I actually nearly resigned because I was like, I cannot be doing this again and I got offered a job and I didn't really want to do it. And I finally decided to take it and then I got promoted anyway. So what I did was I found something else at work and then I saw the positives of not being at flow and being bored.

Ook, and what were those?

That I could spend more time with my family, I could be a greater mom, a greater wife and I could run and run an ultra- marathon which I'd never done before.

Participant 9

And the role I'm doing now plays far more to my strengths than that role did.

Yes, sounds like it, ok, great. So if someone came to you, if you were guiding to someone to achieve this feeling of enjoyment that you've described earlier

Yes.

What would you advise them to do, what conversation would you have with them?

So I would have a conversation with them, probably about 3 things, so the first would be around, passion, so what's their passion, what do they want to do. So very hard, some people know and a whole lot of people don't know, which I even know myself. So, a similar kind of thing, so you can call it flow or whatever it is but what are you passionate about? What are you good at?

Ya

So what do you bring? What are your competencies? What are your experience? What are your strengths etc?

And then, what is the organisation needing? And can you find something that, like a bit of a sweet spot if you like between those.

APPENDIX D

Respondent consent form

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MMBEC RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Study to determine how coaching can facilitate creation of "flow" experiences in Executive workplaces

INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Who I am
Hello, I am Carmen Whateley. I am conducting research for the purpose of completing my Masters in Business Executive Coaching at Wits Business School.

What I am doing
I am conducting research on the implications of executive flow experiences for coaching practice. To this end I am conducting a qualitative study with 12 executives and 4 executive coaches to establish how flow is experienced by executives in the workplace, how these experiences can be facilitated and finally how the coaching process should function to foster flow experiences.

Your participation
I am asking you whether you will allow me to conduct one interview with you. If you agree, I will ask you to participate in one interview for approximately one hour. I am also asking you to give us permission to record the interview. I record interviews so that I can accurately record what is said.

Please understand that **your participation is voluntary** and you are not being forced to take part in this study. The choice of whether to participate or not, is yours alone. If you choose not take part, you will not be affected in any way whatsoever. If you agree to participate, you may stop participating in the research at any time and tell me that you don't want to continue. If you do this there will also be no penalties and you will NOT be prejudiced in ANY way.

Confidentiality
Any study records that identify you will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including my academic supervisor/s. (All of these people are required to keep your identity confidential.)

All study records will be destroyed after the completion and marking of my thesis. I will refer to you by a code number or pseudonym (another name) in the thesis and any further publication.

Risks/discomforts
At the present time, I do not see any risks in your participation. The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life.

Benefits
There are no immediate benefits to you from participating in this study. However, this study will be extremely helpful to us in understanding how Executive Coaching can support the creation of flow experiences in the workplace to enable executives and organisations to experience the beneficial outcomes of flow, including but not limited to enjoyment and ongoing growth at work for individuals and improved performance to benefit the organisation as well.

If you would like to receive feedback on the study, I can send you the results of the study when it is completed and evaluated sometime after February 2017.

Who to contact if you have been harmed or have any concerns
This research has been approved by the Wits Business School. If you have any complaints about ethical aspects of the research or feel that you have been harmed in any way by participating in this study, please contact the Research Office Manager at the Wits Business School, Mmabatho Leeuw. Mmabatho.leeuw@wits.ac.za

If you have concerns or questions about the research you may call my academic research supervisor …….(include a direct office number).

CONSENT

I hereby agree to participate in research on how coaching can facilitate executive flow experiences. I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can stop participating at any point should I not want to continue and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively.

I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not necessarily to benefit me personally in the immediate or short term.

I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

……..
Signature of participant **Date**:……..

I hereby agree to the tape-recording of my participation in the study.

……..
Signature of participant **Date**:……..