

Knowledge Worker

Boosting Knowledge Worker Productivity

(July 2017)

Thanks to T. J. Elliott, until recently the CLO at Educational Testing Service (ETS), I was recently pointed to an article on the McKinsey & Company site titled “Boosting the Productivity of Knowledge Workers.” The title reminded me of something important: to focus on improving the productivity of knowledge *workers* is the wrong focus and is in fact counter-productive. The focus of productivity improvement efforts should be on the *work* not the worker.

The productivity of knowledge work can indeed and should indeed be improved. But what about the workers? What is to be done there? Well, as Peter Drucker so eloquently put it so many years ago, “The great management task of this century will be to make knowledge work more productive and the knowledge worker more achieving (1969, p. 290).” Management is well-equipped to do the former and struggles to do the latter. It wears still the blinders of the industrial era.

The article in question asserts that “knowledge work involves more diverse and amorphous tasks than do production or clerical positions, where the relatively clear-cut, predictable activities make jobs easier to automate or streamline.” That is true enough but a critical point is left unsaid; namely, that knowledge workers must *configure* their responses to the situation at hand instead of simply carrying out a prefigured routine. Knowledge workers must figure out what to do instead of doing what someone else has already figured out.

If it is true that knowledge workers must configure their responses to the situation at hand, what does that configuration process look like? Better yet, what *should* it look like?

Configuring a response to a given situation begins with specifying the result or outcome to be achieved. To specify a result is to state *what* should be achieved. Specifying a result is followed by specifying its value, its importance, its contribution; in other words, *why* the result should be achieved.

With *what* and *why* in hand, attention turns next to when, when is the result to be achieved?

Next comes *how*. What actions will lead to or produce the desired result?

What’s left, of course, are the matters of *who* and *where*.

Who, what, why, when, where and how – these tenets of journalism and guidelines for investigative reporting are also the key elements that must be determined in configuring a course of action that will lead to a particular result or outcome.

The "Five Ws" (and one H) were memorialized by Rudyard Kipling in his *Just So Stories* (1902), in which a poem accompanying the tale of "The Elephant's Child" opens with:

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);*

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*Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

It would seem Kipling anticipated the shift to knowledge work and the basic means of making it more productive.

References

1. Drucker, P.F., (1969). *The Age of Discontinuity*. Harper and Row: New York
2. Kipling, R., (1902). *Just So Stories*. George S. Morang & Co.: Toronto
3. Matson, E. and Prusak, L., (Sep 2010). "Boosting the Productivity of Knowledge Workers," in *McKinsey Quarterly*. Available on the web at <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/boosting-the-productivity-of-knowledge-workers>

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).