Knowledge Worker

Knowledge Work: What It's All About

(March 2015)

Given the title of this column, it seems fitting to write about Knowledge Work.

Point 1: The Shift to Knowledge Work

For thousands of years, most work was manual work, that is, it was materials-based, and working was a visible activity that entailed using one's muscles more than one's mind. Owing to its highly visible nature and its materials-base, manual work could be *prefigured*, that is, others could figure out what needed to be done and how, and then pay (or coerce) others to carry out these prefigured routines. Needless to say, the ability to supervise disappeared along with the ability to see what people were doing.

Then things changed. More and more of the prefigured or "muscle work" has been turned over to machines and more and more of the work performed by people requires them to work with information instead of materials. Moreover, instead of simply doing what others have figured out, they must figure out what to do. They must *configure* their own working activities.

To recap: Work and working have shifted from prefigured routines designed for specific, usually standardized conditions, to configured responses to the situation at hand (almost certain to be nonstandard). And the basis of work itself has shifted from materials to information. Consequently, the locus of control over working activities has shifted from management to the worker. This is the shift to "knowledge work" that the late Peter Drucker wrote about for more than 40 years.

Point 2: Knowledge as the Source of Innovation and Competitive Advantage

Most companies are under intense competitive pressure. Their only sustainable competitive advantage appears to lie in continuous innovation. Moreover, that innovation must occur in a company's processes as well as its products and services.

The work of innovating is knowledge work; it goes on in people's heads where it can't be seen. It is also *configured* work instead of *prefigured* work, which makes managing the work of innovation through direct supervision an impossible task. The work of innovating also depends on creating new knowledge or at least on finding new ways of applying existing knowledge. This, too, is knowledge work and it is performed by people, not machines. Thus, the source of innovation and of competitive advantage lies in people, their working activities, and the knowledge they apply and create.

Management's Responses

The shift to knowledge work occurred in large measure between 1920 and 1980. Peter Drucker chronicled that shift from 1959 until his death in 2005 and he wrote extensively regarding its nature and

implications. Management was slow to catch on but eventually it did and it has been scrambling to refocus its managerial efforts since the mid-1980s.

One managerial response to the shift to knowledge work has been to shift the focus of managerial control away from individual tasks to work processes. Similarly, another response has been to shift managerial focus from individual effort to team-based projects. A third managerial response has been to focus on knowledge itself.

In the beginning of the knowledge management (KM) movement, emphasis was placed on repositories, "warehouses" of data, information, and knowledge that people could search and from which they could extract what they needed. Emphasis was also placed on capturing the know-how possessed by people. "Expert systems" came into vogue and are still useful in some situations. Then came the identification, capture, and sharing of best practices. We are now at a stage where the systematic creation of new knowledge is critical.

Knowledge management is critical to the success and survival of many companies. One of the real risks is that the term has become so faddish that managers and executives ignore not just the term but the underlying issues. These issues may be summed up in a single question: *How can the people in an organization leverage their knowledge to the competitive advantage of their organization?*

Another significant risk posed to attempts to manage and leverage knowledge is to make knowledge management a technological issue. Technology is an important tool, but the management of knowledge is not primarily a technological problem, it is chiefly a sociological problem. For knowledge to add value, it must be applied to by someone to something. In other words, it must be applied and acted upon. Organizations don't do anything, people do; more specifically, organizations don't learn, people do.

Capturing implicit knowledge, the private know-how held by people, raises fears and concerns. This became clear in numerous efforts that captured the logic of claims processing, loan approval processes and insurance underwriting in the form of algorithmic job aids. These later became the basis for more automation, doing away with many jobs. Capturing tacit knowledge, the kind that can't be articulated, is, by definition, impossible. Yet, even though it can't be captured, capabilities that are attributed to the tacit knowledge held by one person can be developed on the part of others.

Making data warehouses and knowledge warehouses available won't guarantee their use. Nor will pointing to a best practice guarantee its adoption. Incentives for sharing won't necessarily overcome the tendency to hoard methods and techniques and a dull person armed with the latest in search technologies will never outperform a bright, curious person who is equipped with far inferior tools. In the last analysis, knowledge management is a people management problem and people must increasingly manage themselves.

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The Central Issue

Codifying, capturing and communicating knowledge is only part of the problem knowledge management must solve, and perhaps the lesser of two parts. The unquestionably central issue in knowledge management is that of being able to bring relevant, valid knowledge to bear at will. It is the ability to *deploy* and *employ* knowledge in the service of the company that matters most. The ability to do so constitutes a strategic competitive advantage for any company that can master it.

Given that the ability to deploy and employ knowledge is the central issue and that, in the final analysis, this must occur through people, some commonplace organizational practices have the potential to play a key role in knowledge management. Recruiting, for instance, can be a means of acquiring certain know-how; so can an acquisition of an entire company. Training is a way of disseminating and diffusing know-how. So are rotational assignments. Encouraging experimentation is also a means of fostering the creation of new knowledge and innovation. A company's R&D function is an exercise in knowledge management writ large. How might those R&D processes be improved? Capturing and sharing best practices is a valid strategy; so is the systematic improvement of performance. (The first approach emulates best practices; the latter creates them.) The list of possibilities goes on and on. The point to be made is that the domain of knowledge management can be as broad or as narrow as a company wishes to make it.

In the end, what knowledge work and knowledge management are all about is the management of the enterprise and that, in turn, is in the hands of those people we call "knowledge workers." Perhaps the most significant step we can take is to stop viewing employees as mere instruments of managerial will and instead view and deal with them as agents, as people who act in the best interests of and on behalf of their employers. To succeed in that regard will require vastly increased levels of what is generally known as "engagement."

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.