

Knowledge Worker

My Last Column

(December 2017)

This month's column was meant to be my last – and it will be my last – for 2017. After receiving lots of encouragement to keep writing the column I've decided to continue – at least for the foreseeable future. In this month's column I will share some reflections about knowledge work and knowledge workers that came to mind while I was contemplating my earlier, now reversed, decision to stop writing the column.

I've been writing this column for more than four years. I first began writing about knowledge work for ISPI back in 1983 when Thiagi was the editor of *Performance & Instruction* and he published an article of mine titled, "Half a Needs Assessment: What is in the World of Work and Working." That article focused on the shift to knowledge work and its many implications.

My interest in knowledge work stems mainly from the writings of the late Peter F. Drucker. Thanks to him I pursued many other sources, especially the works of Frederick Winslow Taylor. I also have a deeply personal interest in the subject; after all, I am a knowledge worker and have been for more than 60 years. I started out as a technician in the United States Navy, moving on to instructor and internal OD consultant and then, upon retirement, taking up a career in the private sector, first as a consultant, then as an executive and then a return to consulting. Lastly, I am a writer.

Much has been written about knowledge work and knowledge workers and a great deal of attention has been paid to knowledge management (KM). Yet, it is my sense that the adaptation to the shift to knowledge work has been a mixed bag, marked by two extreme positions. First, there are those who would get inside the worker's mind and exercise control there. Second, there are those who essentially have thrown up their hands and focused on motivating people who must manage themselves (whether singly or in teams).

It is true that knowledge workers can't be controlled in the same ways that were possible with manual workers. For one thing, a great deal of knowledge work goes on in the head where it can't be seen. For another, a great deal of knowledge work requires the worker to configure his or her responses to the circumstances at hand instead of carrying out prefigured routines. But knowledge work can be managed even if the knowledge worker can't be controlled. Therein lies an important point: *Focus on the work, not the worker.*

The shift to knowledge work brought with it the requirement to view the worker differently. Instead of an instrument of managerial will, the knowledge worker is more profitably viewed as an agent, acting on behalf of and in the interests of the employer. Additionally, because overt, physical behavior is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to knowledge work, a view of the worker as a stimulus-response mechanism will no longer suffice. Compliance is no longer the aim. Instead, management must seek contributions from the knowledge worker and that entails a view of people as purposeful, living control systems, whose behavior serves their purposes as well as those of their employers. That said, although it is true that knowledge workers exercise a considerable degree of discretion in their work and thus require a considerable degree of autonomy, they are not completely autonomous. They are still subject

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to the organization's authority system, to its rules, to its policies and, hopefully, in the service of its mission, goals and objectives.

All knowledge workers are well-served by keeping in mind that their job security and leverage as knowledge workers are inversely correlated with the ease of their replacement; the more easily they are replaced, the less job security and leverage they have.

Knowledge workers are problem solvers and I've written at length about problem solving, solving problems and a process I call "Solution Engineering." I've also written at length about a different view of people, one based on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) and that uses a model known as the GAP-ACT or Target Model. In short, I've pretty much said what I have to say about the basics of knowledge work and knowledge workers. I hope those of you who read my column have found it interesting, relevant and useful.

I turned 80 in October of this year and my initial reaction was that it was time for me to move on. However, as I said at the outset of this month's column, I will continue to write this column for the foreseeable future (which, at 80 years of age, isn't really all that foreseeable).

For those of you who are interested, I maintain on my web site a complete listing of all the Knowledge Worker columns I've written with links to PDF versions. All are freely available. You can find the list at <https://www.nickols.us/PerfExpress.html>.

In closing, I look forward to providing you with more food for thought about knowledge work and knowledge workers.

Reference

Nickols, F. W. (Oct 1983), "Half a Needs Assessment: What Is in the World of Work and Working." *Performance & Instruction*, Vol 22, No 8, pp 24-27. NSPI: Washington, D.C. (Reprinted as a classic in knowledge management in the 2000 edition of the Butterworth-Heinemann Knowledge Management Yearbook.) A lightly edited version retitled "The Shift to Knowledge Work" is available on my web site at <https://www.nickols.us/shift.pdf>.

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](#).