Knowledge Worker
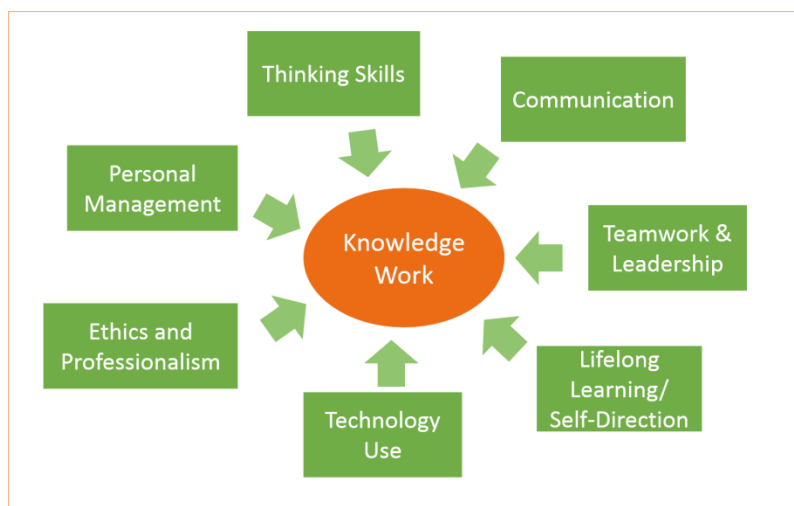## The Seven Skills of Knowledge Work
(June 2015)

From time to time I come across really useful notions related to knowledge work and knowledge workers. Recently, I came across a blog post by Dr. Joel Gardner, Ph.D., CPT that speaks to seven general skills required for success in the knowledge society. Joel is a professor at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio and, like me, is extremely interested in knowledge work and knowledge workers. I asked Joel if he would be agreeable to me using a section of his blog post as this month's Knowledge Workers column. He agreed and some of his thoughts about the seven skills of knowledge work begin immediately below. Think of Joel as the guest author of this month's column. A link to his original blog post is provided at the end of this piece.

Joel Gardner's Seven Skills of Knowledge Work

We are now working in the **knowledge society,** in which information and knowledge are the primary commodity. The majority of employees in this society are knowledge workers, which means their primary function is to gather and create new knowledge. The nature of work in the knowledge society is cross-disciplinary, complex, varied, and ambiguous, and knowledge workers must be able to access and use broad knowledge in flexible yet disciplined manner.

General Skills for Success in the Knowledge Society

Because I work in the field of education, specifically instructional design, I am constantly thinking about what knowledge and skills our students need to grasp to be successful in their knowledge work. What do they really need to know? I recently reviewed several reports and studies on what these skills are, and I describe them below. I then postulate what I believe organizations and leaders should do to enable successful knowledge work in their employees. Finally, I share a self-evaluation tool which can be used to evaluate your own capacities in each of these skill areas.

Seven Skills of Knowledge Work

The following skills and abilities are those which are crucial to success in today's society. I use the work of Cochran and Ferrari (2009) as the framework, though the themes they share are repeated in the

several articles and documents I reviewed. I have added in my own thoughts and insights, and also added the "Personal Management" skill as my own.

1. **Thinking Skills** - the ability to work with information effectively to solve problems, perform tasks, and design solutions. Thinking skills include:
   a. *critical thinking* - drawing appropriate conclusions based on data
   b. *systems thinking* - seeing the big picture, including how parts of a system affect and influence one another
   c. *analysis skills* - breaking down information and technologies into pieces to understand and categorize individual parts. Identifying the root cause of a problem.
   d. *problem solving* - identifying solutions to complex issues.
   e. *creativity* - using imagination to combine existing knowledge into new knowledge to fulfill a need.
   f. *design* - planning out the implementation of solutions to learning and performance problems.

2. **Communication** - the ability to understand and share ideas effectively. This includes the following:
   a. Understand and interpret complex information from multiple sources through divers media.
   b. Communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of formats, including visual, verbal, written, both face-to-face and in digital formats.

3. **Teamwork and Leadership** - the ability to work with others to achieve a common goal. This includes the following:
   a. collaborating and working effectively with others to achieve goals.
   b. motivating others through appropriate strategies.
   c. working effectively with team and individual strengths to maximize the effectiveness of the whole.
   d. leading people to positive outcomes through persuasion, empathy, and effective management.

4. **Lifelong Learning and Self-Direction** - (see my **post on lifelong learning**) continual self-improvement through the constant gathering of knowledge. Setting ones own direction in learning and growth. This includes the following:
   a. Development of general skills like those in this list.
   b. Development of field-specific skills.
   c. Gaining formal education, which to increase ability to sustain success in the knowledge society.

5. **Technology Use** - use of technology to accomplish goals or tasks.
   a. Select the right tools and technologies for tasks and problem solving.

b. Use tools and technologies to appropriately complete tasks and solve problems.

c. Learn quickly how to use a new technology and be willing to adapt new technologies continuously.

6. **Ethics and Professionalism** - An ethical person makes him or herself personally accountable for their own actions and work.

a. Have good work habits and perform assigned work consistently.

b. Interact with others in a professional manner.

c. Work effectively and professionally with people of diverse backgrounds.

7. **Personal Management** - manage habits to maintain health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual). This management should seek to maintain proper balance in all areas of life (family, work, personal, community). It includes the effective management and use of time to accomplish work and achieve goals.

Organizations and Leaders in the Knowledge Society

Organizations and leaders must facilitate the acquisition and application of each of these skills. This means policies, procedures, and organizational structures that enable their employees to do these things. It also means leaders and managers that encourage and facilitate their use. (For some ideas about how management can promote and develop these seven skills see Joel Gardner's original post at the link below).

Instructional Designers in the Knowledge Society

It becomes critical for an instructional design or performance improvement professional to have a sound balance between these general skills and those skills that are specific to the field of instructional design. Some of these skills clearly overlap - thinking skills are the foundation of effective needs analysis, for example - but gaining competency in all of the above skills will likely contribute to an instructional designer's success in improving learning and performance.

Rating Your Own Skill Level in These Areas

(For an easy way to rate your own skill level in the seven skill areas see Joel's original blog post).

Link to Joel Gardner's Original Blog Post

http://joelleegardner.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-7-skills-of-knowledge-work.html

Reference

Cochran, G. R., & Ferrari, T. M. (2009) "preparing youth for the 21st century knowledge economy". Afterschool Matters.

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 managing partner of Distance Learning LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' 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*.

About Joel Gardner

Dr. Joel Gardner, Ph.D., CPT, is a scholar and educator in the field of instructional design and human performance technology. He is currently serving as the Program Chair of the Instructional Design and Performance Technology Master's Degree at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio.