

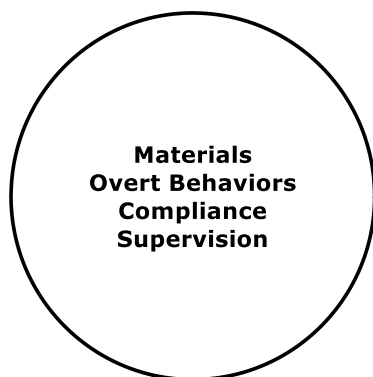
# Knowledge Worker

## We Live in Two Different Worlds

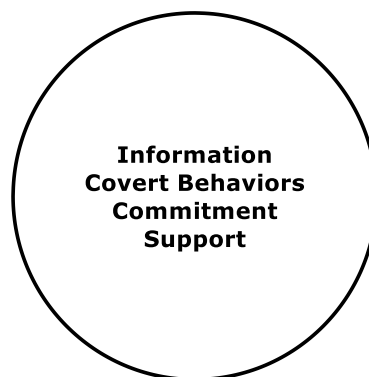
(March 2017)

The title of this month's column draws from the lyrics of a country music song sung by the likes of Hank Williams, Roy Acuff, Don Gibson and others. I'm using the lyrics to introduce the notion that there are two very different worlds of work and working. I'm surprised that fact doesn't drive more managers into some kind of schizophrenia. The two worlds of work and working to which I refer are (1) the world of *prefigured* working activities (a.k.a. manual work) and (2) the world of *configured* working activities (a.k.a. knowledge work). In this month's column, I will examine some of the more important differences between the two and some of the more important implications of those differences.

### **The World of Prefigured Working Activities**



### **The World of Configured Working Activities**



*Figure 1 – Two Different Worlds*

In addition to the nature of the working activities (i.e., prefigured vs configured), there is also a difference between what is being worked on. In some cases, it's materials, solid, tangible, things. In other cases, it's information, abstract things like facts, figures, trends, opinions, beliefs and knowledge. That's the world of information-based work or what some like to call "knowledge work."

When work focuses on materials, the working activities of the worker are mostly overt, they can be observed. When work focuses on information, the working activities of the worker are mostly covert, they can't be observed.

The preceding comments suggest four basic kinds of work as depicted in Figure 2 below. However, it is the difference between prefigured and configured that creates two different worlds of work and working.

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<b>Configured</b>	<b>I</b> Materials Craft (Cabinet Maker)	<b>II</b> Information Craft (Researcher)
	<b>III</b> Materials Production (Picker-Packer)	<b>IV</b> Information Production (Claims Examiner)
<b>Process</b>		
<b>Prefigured</b>		
	<b>Materials</b>	<b>Information</b>
	<b>Content</b>	

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*Figure 2 – Work Process & Work Content*

When working activities are or can be prefigured, what is wanted from the worker is compliance with that prefigured working routine. Compliance can be ensured through supervision. But, when working activities must be configured, what is wanted from the worker is his or her commitment; in particular, a commitment to figuring out what to do, how to do it and then getting it done. In this world, supervision is impossible, and compliance is irrelevant. Even if the worker is doing materials-based work, it does little good to rely on supervision or compliance because it is still the worker who must figure out what to do.

There is still plenty of materials-based work that can be accomplished by way of prefigured work routines. But there is at least an equal and probably a greater amount of work that requires the worker to figure out what to do.

So there you have it – a basic split between two very different kinds of working activities, each of which poses very different requirements and challenges to managers, workers and performance improvement

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specialists. In the case of prefigured working activities management can rely on supervision and on ways and means of ensuring compliance. In the case of configured working activities, they can't do that; they must instead seek the worker's commitment and focus on providing support instead of imposing supervision. Moreover, when it comes to improving the performance of people who have to configure their working activities, it is the worker who must figure out how to improve his or her own performance. In this case, the best use of performance improvement specialists lies in transferring their know-how to the worker instead of trying to apply it to the worker.

### Some Speculation

Those of us who are employed spend roughly half our waking lives in some kind of organization. We are what Peter Drucker (1992) termed a "society of organizations." Whether or not "corporations rule the world," as later suggested by David Korten (1995), is a matter still under debate and still of concern to us all. In any case, it is in organizations where these two different worlds of work are found. Many of us grew up in and labored in the first kind, the kind associated with prefigured work routines. Younger generations witnessed the decline of that world. Even younger generations never saw or experienced it and many of them are now working in the second world of work, the world of configured working activities.

I suspect that these two different worlds of work are reflected in the sharp political divisions plaguing this country. Those shuttered factories dotting our landscape used to be home to thousands of people carrying out prefigured work routines and who were accustomed to living and working in a hierarchical, authoritarian system. Automation, mechanization and off-shoring put them out of work and left them feeling angry, ignored, neglected and betrayed. The new world of configured working activities seems home to younger, more free-spirited generations of people who clearly have little or no use for rigid, authoritarian structures and who feel they owe little in the way of loyalty to their employers because they have seen or have come to believe that the loyalty given to employers by their prefigured predecessors was not returned in kind.

It seems clear to me that those of who identify ourselves as performance improvement professionals have to deal with both worlds. How is that working out for you, dear reader? How is practicing your profession in one world different from practicing it in the other?

### References

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2. Korten, D., (1995). *When Corporations Rule the World*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco.

### 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

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