

Knowledge Worker

Drucker's Dictums

(May 2017)

I was recently pointed to an article on the McKinsey & Company web site titled [“Boosting the Productivity of Knowledge Workers.”](#) Right away I knew something was amiss. The focus of efforts to improve productivity should be on the work, not the worker. And so I was prompted to make a comment to that effect and post a link to a paper on my site titled, [“Drucker's Dictums: Knowledge Work, Workers and Working.”](#)

Subsequently, Klaus Wittkuhn, the president of ISPI, invited me to this year's ISPI conference in Montreal to participate in an activity focusing on the challenges involved in making knowledge work productive. Regrettably, I can't make this year's conference but, in the meantime, I can draw attention to some of the challenges in making knowledge work productive.

In this month's column I will present a sampling of “Drucker's Dictums.” First, a few words about the late Peter Drucker (1909-2005).

No one paid more attention to the shift to knowledge work or the rise of the knowledge worker than the late Peter Drucker (1909-2005). Starting in 1959, with *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, and continuing to his death in 2005, Drucker steadfastly chronicled and commented about the challenge of making knowledge work productive and the knowledge worker achieving. This column presents a few of what I view as some of his more important comments (i.e., “dictums”) taken from the three books in which he commented at great length on that challenge: *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, *The Age of Discontinuity* and *Management*. His challenge, by the way, is still with us.

Landmarks of Tomorrow (1959)

The section of *Landmarks of Tomorrow* that most closely ties to the issues of knowledge work, knowledge workers and productivity is Chapter 5, The Educated Society. In it, Drucker wrote:

“The man who works exclusively or primarily with his hands is the one who is increasingly unproductive. Productive work in today's society and economy is work that applies vision, knowledge and concepts – work that is based on the mind rather than on the hand (pp.119-120).

The Age of Discontinuity (1969)

In *The Age of Discontinuity*, Drucker commented at length on the shift to a knowledge economy and knowledge work. He also began his detailed and decades-long chronicling of and commentary about the rise of the knowledge worker. In it, he posed the following challenge:

To make knowledge work productive will be the great management task of this century, just as to make manual work productive was the great management task of the last century (p.290).

Later, in his monumental tome, *Management*, Drucker examined knowledge work and knowledge workers at great length and went into great detail regarding what it would take to meet the challenge he had presented in *The Age of Discontinuity*.

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Management (1973)

The most important thing we know is that work and working are fundamentally different phenomena (pp. 181-182).

The output of the knowledge worker always becomes somebody else's input. It is, therefore, not self-evident in knowledge work, as it is in making a pair of shoes, whether the work has results or not. This can be seen only by projecting backward from the needed end results (p.183).

Knowledge work, therefore, needs far better design, precisely because it cannot be designed *for* the worker. It can be designed only *by* the worker (p.183).

Finally, there is the knowledge worker, and especially the advanced knowledge worker. He has to be a "knowledge professional" . . . This means that no one can motivate him. He has to motivate himself. No one can direct him. Above all, no one can supervise him. He is the guardian of his own standards, of his own performance, of his own performance, and of his own objectives. He can be productive only if he is responsible for his own job (p.279).

I saved for last the following comment by Drucker because I think it is particularly applicable to the current world of work, workers, working and management:

[The] manager has to manage now. He has to find solutions – or at least accommodations – which will enable him to make work productive and the worker achieving. He has to understand what the demands are. He cannot expect to succeed by continuing the practices of the last two hundred years. He will have to develop new approaches, new principles, and new methods – and fast (pp. 196-197).

It is now more than 40 years since Drucker published *Management* and although it can be argued that we have since made considerable progress it can also be argued that we are far from having solved the problem of making knowledge work productive and the knowledge worker achieving. In 2005, the year Peter Drucker passed away, Tom Davenport published *Thinking for a Living*. In it he wrote:

"Yet despite the importance of knowledge workers to the economic success of countries, companies, and other groups, they haven't received sufficient attention (p.8)."

Where all this leaves us, then, is where we are today – in a workplace filled with knowledge workers and we still know precious little about how to deal with them. One thing we do know is that we can't manage *them*; they must manage themselves and it is the job of management – and our job as ISPI members and performance improvement professionals concerned with performance in the workplace – to find ways of equipping knowledge workers to manage their own performance and of then supporting them in doing it.

As I said at the beginning of this column, Drucker's challenge is with us still.

References

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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](#).