Knowledge Worker
To Make Knowledge Work Productive
(December 2020)

A little more than 50 years ago I read and took up Peter Drucker's challenge about making knowledge work productive. In 1969, in *The Age of Discontinuity*, Drucker wrote, "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)."

After 50 years of wrestling with Drucker's challenge, what I have figured out is that to make knowledge work productive is not something *we* can do. Instead, it requires equipping the knowledge worker to do so. I claim no credit for this insight because Drucker himself said it, even if he said it somewhat differently. In 1973, in *Management*, he wrote, "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)."

Knowledge workers must be able to do more than design their own work; they also must be able to analyze, manage and improve their own performance.

When we talk about a person's performance, we are at least in part talking about how well that person does his or her work.

Work is a process, and it has a result.

To perform well, to do your work well, is to effectively, efficiently carry out that process and produce the intended result. This typically requires:

- Clarity regarding the result
- Commitment to achieving it
- A process for achieving it
- The skills, knowledge, tools and other resources needed to carry out that process
- information regarding progress and accomplishment (i.e., feedback)
- Cooperation from and perhaps collaboration with others
- Support from management
- Circumstances that do not obstruct or prevent the process or preclude the result
- The autonomy and authority to assess, adjust and adapt to what are often fluid and sometimes volatile circumstances

Those are the requirements that must be satisfied if a knowledge worker is to perform well. Those are the requirements that a knowledge worker must be able to engineer. They are the conditions of performance for knowledge workers and they are the keys to making knowledge work productive.

References
1. Drucker, P. F., *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969). New York: Harper & Row
2. Drucker, P. F., *Management: Tasks Responsibilities Practices* (1973). New York: Harper & Row

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a 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 *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at Distance Consulting LLC. His web site is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking here.