Knowledge Workers

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ABSTRACT:

The contemporary world demand knowledge and skill-sets that can cope with the environmental flux and economic instability of the prevailing climate. How enterprises respond to such demands will determine whether they survive or perish. Especially within the context of globalization and its implication for recruiting knowledgeable workers, organizations must respond to such challenges by providing competitive learning environments that will foster learning and will allow knowledge workers to obtain optimal performance capable of withstanding and surviving the brutal force of globalization and other "knowledge-intensive companies" (Huang, 2011, p. 924).

Keywords: *Knowledge worker, Learning systems, Collaborative learning, Tacit knowledge, Explicit knowledge*

Knowledge Workers

Fundamental to human existence and advancement is an accumulation of skill-sets, experience, and understanding in how events happen and how improvements occur over an extended period. Throughout life's history, humans have evolved through such apprehension, though process, and comprehension, by advancing the quality of life in every proceeding epoch from the time of the enlightenment movement. According to Huang (2011), the creation and evolution of knowledge-based economies has led to the corresponding demand for knowledge workers because of the high concentration of "knowledge-intensive companies" (p. 924). Knowledge is therefore "a changing system with interactions among experience, skills, facts, relationships, values, thinking processes and meanings" (Mladkova, 2011, p. 826). To extrapolate from one's understanding of knowledge, the knowledge worker is anyone whose main focus in exercising his or her job functions is fundamentally to incorporate knowledge intelligence (Huang, 2011).

Historical Development

Knowledge has long been established as the motivating and influential force for economic activities (Carlsson et al., 2009). However, its relationship in the equation may be less apparent (Carlsson et al., 2009). To appreciate such correlation between knowledge and economic outcome, one may wish to scrutinize the influence research and development (R&D) pose on the process of development, especially those R&D activities conducted by businesses and organizations engaged in generating profit.

Carlsson et al., (2009) posited that organizations conducting research activities often generate additional commercial benefits in the form of new businesses. The authors opined that in generating new business ventures, modern intellectual property (IP) is created thereby producing fresh knowledge. Knowledge creation is not solely the purview of organizations and businesses, however. Academic institutions also engage in generating awareness, understanding, and erudition in new thinking. As Carlsson et al., (2009) noted, the private sector such as organizations and businesses engaged in profit making and universities contribute about 20% in R&D activities annually.

Although managing knowledge workers in any concerted way is a recent phenomenon (Mladkova, 2011), knowledge training has been around for some time. Universities predate private organizations in training workers. As of Medieval times, schools operating under the auspices of religious bodies established institutions of learning as early as 1088 in Bologna (Carlsson et al., 2009). The first technical institution was opened in France in 1794. In those burgeoning years, the focus was not on creating new knowledge but to train individuals in the existing knowledge available at the time. The practice continued with the establishment of private institutions of higher learning in the United States such as Harvard and most of the other Ivy League schools at the turn of the 17th century (Carlsson et al., 2009).

Following the passage of the Civil War in 1865, public universities were mandated to chart new "agricultural experimentation and extension services, industrial training, teacher education, home economics, public health, and veterinary medicine" (Carlsson et al., 2009, p. 1198). This emerging focus directed training in new endeavors never before contemplated. New disciplines and ways of accomplishing tasks appeared because of the thrust to get beyond what existed. The new push, particularly in agriculture, solidified the notion that scholarly practical foray and industrious activities can and do lead to economic benefits. Its success was partly to be credited for the subsequent acceptance of such pursuits in higher education (Carlsson et al., 2009).

The Contemporary Worker

Resulting from the foundational work that occurred between medieval times and the industrial revolution, the modern knowledge worker becomes the staple in organizations for growth and development. Huang (2011) proffered that the overwhelming majority of contemporary workers are possibly knowledge workers. Such realities resulted in a series of new definitions for knowledge workers. Huang (2011) opined that knowledge workers are those individuals who may have peculiar knowledge about their organizations. The author reasoned that in addition to such peculiarities, the individual can use such knowledge effectively, is usually highly intelligent, and may have subtle knowledge to which he or she may be unaware until situations arise that forces recall.

In an attempt to identify fundamental differences between knowledge workers and their blue-collar contemporaries in China and Japan, Huang (2011) conducted a study by examining certain variables between both groups. The author critically analyzed motivating work characteristics, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. The resulting matrix follows.

Table 1: Comparisons Of Knowledge Workers And Blue-Collar Workers In The Research Variables In Each Of Two Countries.

Participants' groups	Variables	Knowledge workers		Blue-collar workers		T-Test
		M	SD	M	SD	t-Value
China participants (n = 371)	Motivating work characteristics	6.61	4.74	4.97	5.20	3.09**
	Job satisfaction	21.32	5.16	22.24	5.05	-1.62††
	Turnover intention	2.85	1.27	1.92	1.28	6.86***
Japan participants (n = 558)	Motivating work characteristics	8.89	3.13	7.12	4.00	5.52***
	Job satisfaction	21.64	3.84	20.92	3.79	1.95†
	Turnover intention	2.74	1.09	2.82	1.09	-0.74

Note. M, mean and SD, standard deviation; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; $^{\dagger}p = 0.051$; and $^{\dagger\dagger}p = 0.107$ (Huang, 2011, p. 934).

As Table 1 illustrates, knowledge workers are substantially more motivated than their blue-collar counterparts, whereas, in relation to job satisfaction and turnover intention, the data indicate only marginal difference between the two groups. The increased motivational characteristics possessed by knowledge workers situate them in a formidable position to capitalize on maximizing efficiencies in businesses for both decisions and actions. Business intelligence (BI) is therefore the purview of the knowledge worker.

Contemporary businesses require BI to establish meaningful relationships and models from the volume of data collected during the normal course of business. According to Kroenke (2011), BI involves a system and tools to record and manipulate data for the purpose of making intelligent decisions. Kroenke (2011) argued that such BI devices would include tools for reporting, data-mining, and knowledge management (KM). Kroenke (2011) opined that KM tools "store employee knowledge and to make that knowledge available to employees, customers, vendors, auditors, and others who need it" (p. 322). Modern and post-modern times demand that knowledge not only be managed but also be shared. Without such collaborative and cooperative endeavors, the acumen of knowledge workers will have been to naught because the very survival of economic activities relies heavily on contemporary knowledge workers sharing ideas and insights.

Knowledge workers conduct knowledge work (Mladkova, 2011). Knowledge workers distinguish themselves in their abilities to self motivate as illustrated earlier in the matrix above. Fundamental to the knowledge worker is his or her ability to retain tacit knowledge, as distinct from explicit knowledge. Mladkova (2012) reasoned that knowledge is used extensively in creative endeavors to advance society. The author proffered that whereas explicit knowledge is stated in rules, regulations, documents, and systems, tacit knowledge "is stored in peoples' brains as mental models, experiences, and skills" (p. 106). The conversion of such knowledge therefore, is essential to modern business enterprises operating profitably as going concerns. In addition to the foregoing, Davenport (2011) suggested that technology is important to improving the output of knowledge workers. Davenport (2011) opined that a disruptive approach to knowledge workers is essential for maintaining the competitive edge because technology provides the collaborative force for effective communication. Technology and knowledge work are phenomenologically connected, one relies on the other. Too often, technology workers will discover that a particular user needs correction to a problem quickly but the solution is not within the knowledge base. In such circumstance, the resolution will only emerge through a combination of experience and scholarly aptitudes.

Conclusion

In summarizing the importance of the knowledge worker to contemporary businesses, one realizes that much is at stake. According to Davenport (2011), diminishing returns may likely set in if appropriate and timely actions are not applied to knowledge work management. The author noted that with the overwhelming volume of information readily available to each worker, relevant information may be an issue. Davenport (2011) opined that organizations bear a responsibility to knowledge workers to help filter information that will achieve job satisfaction. The author posited that far too few executives are au fait of such facts.

Given that "knowledge is a major creative force of the knowledge society" (Mladkova, 2012, p. 105), executives need to take full advantage of its movement, manipulation, and use. Organizations possess a massive reservoir of information; enterprises should apply the appropriate tools for the highest possible benefit. The world is a knowledge economy; therefore, executives and other knowledge managers need to be systematic and forthright in achieving balance and productivity from its knowledge workers.

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