The Laws of the Knowledge Workplace

Changing Roles and the Meaning of Work in Knowledge-Intensive Environments

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Chapter 1
Introducing the Laws of the Knowledge Workplace

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The Laws of the Knowledge Workplace is a project resulting from a research grant from the Polish National Science Center,¹ and was possible thanks to a generous visiting study offer from Harvard University (the Labor and Worklife Program) and a sabbatical granted by Kozminski University.

The book collects research-based chapters on knowledge workers. By presenting accounts and studies from management, organization studies, sociology, and anthropology of work it allows us to gain a deeper, interdisciplinary insight into qualitative studies of knowledge professions. In particular, it covers the issues of professional identity, time overruns, symbolic sacrifices in work, and burn-out, and studies the preferred as well as the disfavoured managerial practices in knowledge-intensive companies.

The project is purposely interdisciplinary: it blends study foci from anthropology, sociology, management, and administrative sciences. In particular, the methods involved are also those not coming from the functional paradigm currently dominant in management (Pfeffer, 1993, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995a, 1995b).

The aim of the book is to collect research-based chapters on the notion of power, management, identity, trust, play, family, and scheduling as perceived by the knowledge workers themselves. This view is certainly slightly skewed by stereotypes of this occupation (Gill, 2003). Still, even stereotypes manifest the ways in which organizational reality is constructed; they are actually job identity expressions, too. They are nothing more, but also nothing less than a particular kind of stories by which actors organize and make sense of their

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workplace (Boje, 1991; Feldman and Skölberg, 2004). Professional roles are socially constructed, enacted, and articulated in discourse and symbols (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Weick, 1969/79; Barley, 1983). In this light the things that members of the analyzed group say form reenactments of their roles. By describing their view on schedules, structures, power, trust, management, organizations, workplace, etc., the employees reproduce the sense and artefacts of daily work (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Krzyworzeka, 2008) and form the basis for their identity and ideology (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988). Therefore the interest of the collected volume is focused on understanding and interpreting what the studied knowledge workers say and mean, what the important topics of their everyday conversations are, or what the categorizations they make in sense-making their work are, and not on whether they are right or wrong, fair or biased.

Knowledge workers are, at least officially, considered to be the most important group in modern organizations. The popularity of this discourse in the official organizational language and literature leads to an interesting paradox: on one hand knowledge workers are perceived as the most valued members of organizations; they are endowed with "professional" status like medics in the old times (Hall, 1986; Abbott, 1988; Brante, 1988), and their professional knowledge serves as a source of new organizational power and recognition (Brint, 1994). On the other hand, they are being manipulated and "engineered", commonly driven to burn-out, and deprived of a private life (Kunda, 1992; Perlow, 2003; Styhre, 2013). Such a discrepancy between the official bureaucratic “rational” language and the actual practice is by no means new (Höpfl, 1995; Grant et al., 1998; Knights and Willmott, 1999), but in the case of knowledge-intensive companies, such as legal firms or software houses, is particularly visible. Moreover, it is concurrent with very specifically developed occupational cultures (Kraft, 1977; Buccarelli, 1988; Trice and Beyer, 1993; Garsten, 1994; Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Hertzum, 2002; Vallas, 2003; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Koźmiński et al., 2009). Manager–worker conflict is taken to a different level (Rosen, 1991; Van Maanen, 1991; Martin, 1993; Roscigno and Hodson, 2004). Maybe this is why the symbolic sacrifices for organizations are so demanded. Although depicted as “rational”, they still play a very ritualistic role, and include ostentatious time dedication, giving up gender, resigning from family, etc. (Czarniawska-Joerges and Höpfl, 2002; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Jemielniak, 2009). As a result, the distinctions between work and household time are blurred and no longer limited physically (Hochschild, 1997). All this leads to significant changes in modern knowledge-intensive workplaces all around the world. The new economy of organizational
relations emerges along with shifts in organizational power (Foucault, 1982; Latour, 1986).

The changes in occupational roles (including managerial ones), especially in knowledge-intensive environments, are by no means small. In fact, the meaning of work has been undergoing serious changes over the last 20 years. Its organization has evolved from the traditional industrial-bureaucratic model in which the standardization of work processes, planning, structural design, control, and formalization are most important (Mintzberg, 1993). As a result, identity-shaping, indoctrination, and creation of emotions become parts of managers’ routines (Jackall, 1988; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). The evaluation of an employee’s work becomes more dependent on his/her intentions and loyalty than just the result.

This phenomenon is still yet insufficiently researched and described, especially from an international perspective. Although many studies have delved into the issue of particular organizations or national changes in labour, there are virtually no qualitative researchers analyzing the shifts in modern work across nations, and in particular studying best practices in knowledge work from the point of view of the worker. This is a significant gap in the scholarship that calls for furthering. This topic, however, is of the utmost significance for management science and also for understanding knowledge-intensive organizations’ competitiveness. Thus, the present volume aims at studying the enactment of the workplace in knowledge-intensive organizations. The goal of the project is to research the “interpretive community” of knowledge workers, their perceptions of work, organizations, management, schedules, family and authority.

Even though managerial literature often points to, and even recommends, an egalitarian and democratic approach to that group of employees (Horibe, 1999; Amar, 2002; Newell et al., 2002), other research findings attest that the reality of work in knowledge-intensive (K-I) organizations is quite different (Kunda, 1992; Hochschild, 1997; Perlow, 2003). The contributors to this edited volume try to address the paradox of rhetorical ambivalence present in many knowledge-intensive organizations.

The organizational and managerial practices in knowledge work are only beginning to be thoroughly delved into (Mosco and Stevens, 2007; Sveiby, 2007), and so far not from a qualitative and comparative perspective. Taking this into account, as well as the utmost importance of knowledge-
intensive work in general economic and organizational development (Huggins and Izushi, 2007; Latusek and Jemielniak, 2007; Styhre, 2008) and the huge influence that organizational and occupational culture has on its effectiveness (Jemielniak, 2002; Davenport, 2005), it is clear that the topic is important.

Quite a lot of knowledge-intensive employees work for corporations. What motivates knowledge workers to work for corporations? How do they define creative aspects of their work? What do they like about their jobs? How do they perceive the organizations they work for: their managers, the schedules they are subject to? What is the understanding of timing in knowledge work, so often prone to delays? How does organizational culture differ in corporations successful in time-management from those that are less successful? What is the construction of power in knowledge-intensive environments? To what extent are the procedures and managerial lingo read as means of disempowerment? What are the factors influencing the professional status of a knowledge worker? How do knowledge workers enact trust and distrust in the workplace? Which factors determine knowledge worker occupational identity formation? What playful behaviors in the workplace are typical for knowledge workers? These questions are just a few examples of areas that the contributors to this volume found interesting. The structure of this volume is as follows.

Alistair Bowden and Malgorzata Ciesielska write about a fascinating shift from knowledge worker to manager in the UK heritage sector. The results of their longitudinal study allow them to make the point that although in current literature the model of advancement and development of a career is often presented, in fact the transition from a knowledge worker to someone who has to manage other knowledge workers’ performance is much more profound and requires a redefinition of the social role.

Maryam Alhamadi Aldossari and Dorota Joanna Bourne address the problem of nepotism and turnover intentions among knowledge workers in Saudi Arabia. They refer to the problems faced by expats and repatriates. In the example of the Saudi Arabian private sector, they describe the issues of staff turnover as well as knowledge expansion in the context of governmental policy for international assignments and the cultural background of nepotism.

Lars Bo Henriksen also focuses on the actual practices of the knowledge-intensive workplace. He discusses the problems of implementation of engineering projects. He uses a storytelling method to present a fascinating narrative about the translation of ideas (rather than their diffusion) in
engineering work. He uses actor-network theory to shed new light on what the education of knowledge workers should look like, and postulates a more holistic approach to the social, the discursive, and the technical aspects of knowledge work.

Vidar Hepsø studies engineers as well, but analyzes coordinating work issues in offshore production systems. He bases his chapter on a qualitative study of Norwegian oil industry. He studies the leader role enactment and the issues of trust and coordination of work in the kinds of knowledge work requiring closer coordination: the repair and modification of offshore production.

Kaja Prystupa-Rządca and Dominika Latusek-Jurczak address a very similar problem, but focus on virtual networks. They describe the role of the leader in virtual teams. Since virtual teams are an increasingly popular form of organization of work, the problems of managing them are of utmost importance for organization studies. Virtual teams are more conflict-driven, and their socialization is more difficult. Prystupa-Rządca and Latusek-Jurczak show that even though a life-cycle approach to product development in virtual teams is difficult, their leadership may benefit more from a dynamic approach to membership roles.

Staying in the virtual world, Aleksandra Przegalińska writes about decision support systems as knowledge workers. She presents a case-study of the Moral Knowledge Expert System, aimed at taking the moral impact of a decision into account of the algorithm. She aims to show the blurring boundaries between human and non-human actors serving as experts in knowledge management decision-making systems.

Sebastian Skolik continues the exploration of virtual organizing, and focuses on qualitative research on the organization of work in Internet prosumer projects. In the example of his fieldwork on Wikipedia, he presents the practical application of a new research method, netnography, as a possible tool for an analysis of the knowledge workplace.

In the last chapter, Wojciech Czakon and Patrycja Klimas describe the problem of making innovative networks work in knowledge-intensive industries. They study network leadership in the example of so-called “Aviation Valley”, a region known for aviation industry development. They bring conclusions about new ways of gaining competitive advantage in knowledge-intensive companies: through network coordination, knowledge management, and relationship building.
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