Foreword

Knowledge-intensive organizations (also, knowledge intensive firms, knowledge companies) spite being described by a rather vacuous and ill-defined term, have been the centre of much attention from management and organization scholars throughout the last two decades (e.g. Alvesson, 1995; Biljsma-Frankema et al., 2006; Schroeder and Pauleen, 2007). Definition-wise, Starbuck (1992) describes a Knowledge Intensive Firm as one in which knowledge has more importance than other inputs and outputs. As all judgments of importance are inevitably discretionary, this gives researchers a considerable leeway in circumscribing their field of study. Nevertheless, there exists a large body of literature (e.g. OECD, 1996; Neef, 1998; Schienstock, 2004) arguing that a radical transformation of global economy is underway, and knowledge-intensive organizations (by this or another name) are at the heart of the new resulting order.

The resulting knowledge economy is said to rely on knowledge as its most important resource (Rooney et al., 2005), and to form the basis of growth for developed economies in the foreseeable future. It can thus be expected to provide the basis for economic value creation (Lengrand & Chartrie, 1999). At the same time, knowledge work is rather unique in the fact that it is rarely precisely evaluated. In fact, quite often the employee's assessment is based more on symbolic sacrifices s/he makes and loyalty, rather than on actual work (Coser, 1974; Hochshild, 1997; Barley & Kunda, 2004). This is especially striking in high-tech corporations (Perlow, 1997, 1998; Cooper, 2000), where precise planning is not really possible (Brookes, 1995; Connel, 2000; Kesteloot, 2003), but increasingly present also in all other white-collar occupations (Barley, 1997). Knowledge-intensive workers spend more and more time at work (Schor, 1991; Jacobs & Gerson, 2001), and are being managed by the means of normative control, rather than the traditional hierarchical model. The old, bureaucratic understanding of management as standardization of work process, planning, structural design, control, and formalization, is no longer applicable (Kanter, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983). This change of organizational practices and of the meaning of management is happening in front of our eyes.

There are also many other paradoxes in knowledge work. For example, many innovation and knowledge management systems are designed to facilitate creativity (Gurteen, 1998), but at the same time by their sheer presence they deter many anti-bureaucrats from activity (Weick, 2006). Knowledge is described as organizational resource (Senge, 1990), and at the same time to reside primarily in individual knowledge workers (Leonard, 1998). These phenomena, while clearly observable, are new and still only perfunctorily researched or described.

Although there have been books related to the subject (Kunda, 1992; Hochshild, 1997; Perlow, 1997), in none this problem has been researched thoroughly from international comparative cross-cultural perspective. There was also no book presenting a juxtaposition of actual organizational practices (as observed in a solid field research) in knowledge-intensive organizations situated in different settings and based upon diverging organizing principles.

Last year, we have had the pleasure of publishing an edited volume entitled "Management Practices in High-Tech Environments" (Jemielniak & Kociatkiewicz, 2008). While that collection touched upon many of the themes also present here, we have come to believe that the subject of knowledge intensive organizations, spanning both high and low technology, for-profit and non-for-profit organizations, management-focused and critical perspectives, is both interesting and cohesive enough to warrant a research handbook of its own.

The present volume is the result of this idea, and the enthusiastic response we have met upon suggesting the topic appears to confirm our expectations. We can thus be proud to present a selection of texts that not only encompass a wide variety of research approaches and theoretical stances, but come together to chart the current boundaries of the study of knowledge intensive organizations. We are confident that this book can serve as an introduction to the field, as a guide to ongoing debates, and as inspiration for further research.

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