

## Editorial Preface

# Guest Editorial Preface on Engaging Flexible Knowledge Workers for Greater Performance

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Modern organizations perform and thrive on the engagement and flexibility of their knowledge workers. It is primarily because such flexible knowledge workers are experts in their field, rarely available, expensive to hire and provide services only for the short term. If engaged properly, they can contribute significantly to organizational productivity. However, the extant literature on understanding the predictors of group or organizational performance relates to the organizational behavior and human resource management theories. While those theories are valuable to predict the behaviors of the non-flexible workforce, more attention to knowledge management theories is required to predict the flexible knowledge workers' behavior. Therefore, this article briefly reviews the existing state of knowledge management, relates knowledge workers with engagement, and discusses directions for future research. It then introduces the articles in this special issue by inter-linking them with a common thread of knowledge management and organizational outcomes.

In order to enhance organizational performance, the knowledge-intensive organizations are increasingly relying on flexible workers who are primarily part-timers, freelancers, and casual workers (Adams & Demaiter, 2008; Adams & Demaiter, 2010; Gupta, 2018). Indeed, ability to manage flexible knowledge workers has become a core-competence for an organization. The reason is that appointing such workers enables organizations to use their specialized knowledge, technique or skill to enhance the group and organizational performance (Alexander & Martin, 2013). When an organization requires a specialized skill for a short duration and not on a regular basis, it is advantageous to utilize the services of knowledge workers from the market rather than employing them on a full-time basis. Multi-national companies such as General Electric, Accenture, Google have already taken major steps in this direction by adapting their existing human resource practices to embrace a flexible workforce (Doyle, 1992). Knowledge workers, who invest cognitive energies more than the emotional and physical energies at work, form a specific community within the flexible workforce (Gherardi & Murgia, 2012). The members of this community could be nurses, doctors, teachers, surgeons, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals (Singh, 2010). The 'flexibility' component connotes at least one of the following two characteristics: (1) absence of role demarcations and (2) working as part-timers, freelancers, or casual workers.

To date, the literature relating to the workforce is limited to organizational behavior or human resource management theories. However, flexible knowledge workforce is different from its

counterparts and requires to be seen through the lens of knowledge management theories. These may help scholars and practitioners understand how the transfer, flow, and sharing of knowledge occurs in the workplace. From the term ‘knowledge management,’ the authors mean “...a conscious effort to get the right knowledge to the right people at the right time so that it can be shared and put into action...” (Mathis & Jackson, 2010, p. 254).

Thus, the overreaching research question that this special issue answers is: how to engage flexible knowledge workers for greater group and organizational productivity? For this, the rest of this paper espouses the following structure: The first section is about clarifying the meaning of engaged workers and their relationship with knowledge management. The second section is about engaging flexible knowledge workforce for performance. The third section briefly discusses the papers that this special issue comprises which mainly relates to identifying and appreciating the linkages among them. The fourths section concludes this paper.

## **KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND ENGAGED WORKFORCE**

The primary objective of managing knowledge is to identify, share, transfer, and preserve the knowledge of the core competence that an organization possesses (Jennex & Olfman, 2005; Juan et al., 2016). Indeed, employees play a crucial role in performing these activities. Knowledge management requires employees to regularly discover the ways of capturing and acquiring the knowledge about individuals and groups comprehensively. Apparently, the employees need to focus physically, cognitively, and emotionally to manage the knowledge an organization has. Such employees who simultaneously and discretionarily invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies into their work are called ‘engaged employees’. Not surprisingly, recent studies on engagement provide evidence for the importance of engaging employees for positive outcomes at both group and organizational levels (Gupta & Shaheen, 2017; Gupta, Shaheen, & Reddy, 2017; Gupta, & Pandey, 2018; Gupta & Sayeed, 2016; Gupta, 2018; Gupta, & Shukla, 2018; Gupta, Ravindranath, & Kumar, 2018; Gupta, Shaheen, & Das, 2018). The employees who manage knowledge are often termed ‘knowledge workers’ as they are employed because of their knowledge of a subject matter rather than their ability to perform a manual work (Serrat, 2017). The following paragraphs discuss the significance of each of the knowledge management activities namely knowledge transfer, flow, and sharing in engaging flexible knowledge workers.

*Knowledge sharing* is the collective use of the knowledge shared by individuals to realize common interests (Tsai, 2002). Because sharing of knowledge requires cooperation among individuals, a task conflict is likely to enhance the engagement levels among them (Chen, Zhang, & Vogel, 2011). This is the reason why organizations would rely on engaged employees to promote knowledge sharing activities among their employees (Foss et al., 2009).

*Knowledge transfer* is a process of receiving the others’ knowledge. It is often used by organizational actors such as groups and organizations (Chong et al., 2017). Though the knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing terms have been used interchangeably, there is a thin line of difference. As Heeager and Nielsen (2017) put it, unlike knowledge transfer that requires the transfer of knowledge between individuals and/or groups through interaction, knowledge sharing does not necessarily require the sender to know every influenced recipient. Therefore, knowledge transfer needs trust among individuals or groups. The investment of physical, emotional, and cognitive labors into the work tends to enhance employees’ propensity to interact with others to transfer their enhanced knowledge (Godkin, 2015).

Unlike the difference between knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, the literature on knowledge management does not clarify how they are different from knowledge flow. However, knowledge flow, knowledge sharing, and knowledge transfer have ‘an exchange of knowledge’ in common.

## Engaging Flexible Knowledge Workforce for Performance

Unlike traditional employment contracts, the association between the flexible knowledge workers and the organization is time-bound and is limited to the completion of a particular project or a set of activities. Flexibility coupled with temporariness of the agile workforce makes it extremely challenging for the human resource managers to keep them engaged and perform. The managers need to accommodate those factors at every stage of the human resource management process starting from recruitment to leadership development that tends to engage flexible workers.

The prime questions that managers want to be answered include: What steps are needed to engage talented, flexible workers? How the traditional human resource practices can be aligned with that of the flexible ones? What could be the individual- and organization-level performance outcomes of engaging, flexible workers? Sparse research on these questions calls for a thorough exploration and examination of causes and consequences of engaging flexible workforce. The articles of this issue throw light on the aforementioned areas.

All three articles in this special issue are grounded in Indian setting. India is a major IT hub and produces many technically qualified youths every year that get absorbed in the IT/ItES sector. Prior studies have shown that the uniqueness of this settings in terms of established and new relationships (Pandey & Singh, 2015a) and their congruence with classical India thought (Pandey & Singh, 2015b). This issue enriches this arena of studies based in developing contexts and a newer form of at-will employment relationship.

The first article, 'Antecedents of new recruit's adjustment: an empirical study on Indian IT industry', contributed by Deshpande and Gupta on antecedents of new recruit's adjustment in Indian information technology (IT) industry takes a look at the bottom of the organization with new recruits. The authors argued that the Indian IT industry is a knowledge-driven industry and its employees are knowledge agents who become repositories of explicit and tacit information over time. According to their study, their understanding of 'flexibility' was relating to the absence of role demarcations. For the flexible knowledge workers in the IT industry, the authors hypothesized that the relationships among supervisory support, psychological empowerment, and feedback seeking behaviors have an important role in determining the extent to which they can adjust in the new system. Their study emphasized the importance of supportive supervisors who aid employees fit into the organization thus aiding in the creation of future knowledge repositories in the organizations. Though the authors did not measure 'engagement' as an explicit variable, it was argued that due to new work environment, the new-recruits find it challenging to engage themselves in the workplace and so, supervisory support is crucial for making them adjust to the new environment.

The second article 'Examining the role of technology leadership on knowledge sharing behaviour' by Srivastava takes a look at the top of the organization by examining the role of technology leadership on knowledge sharing behavior for hotel employees in India. Like the first study, this study was also based on the understanding that absence of role demarcations connotes flexibility in the work and those who need to use a lot of cognition as knowledge workers. The author took technology leadership on Level 1 and other variables such as internet self-efficacy, knowledge sharing and IT support for knowledge management on Level 2. It was argued that the transformation of individuals to knowledge repositories is not enough in the organization. It is because individuals must also share the knowledge among other employees to help organizations reap the benefits of knowledge sharing. This study also brought to account the mediating and moderating mechanisms of internet self-efficacy and IT support for knowledge management respectively.

The third article 'The mediation of psychological capital in the relationship of perceived organizational support, engagement and extra-role performance' authored by Shaheen and Krishnankutty looks at the mediation of psychological capital in the relationship of perceived organizational support, engagement and extra-role performance for insurance agents in India. Unlike the first and the second study, the authors had 'work engagement' as an explicit measure. Their understanding of 'flexibility' was relating to the other aspect that is 'those who work as part-timers, freelancers, or casual workers'. They used insurance agents as their target population as they are on contracts and need to use their extensive financial knowledge judiciously to close a deal. This

study takes an inside look at individuals by highlighting the importance of psychological capital in enhancing work level outcomes of engagement and extra-role performance.

The aforementioned three papers explore three different ways of engaging flexible knowledge workers. The findings of these papers provide insights into the management of flexible knowledge workers that can lead to desired outcomes at all levels of an organization.

## **DISCUSSION**

In today's business environment it would not be wrong to state that knowledge is power and its creation, maintenance and utilization by mobile repositories in the form of liquid knowledge workers that can dictate present and future success trajectory of the organization. In order to enhance desired attitudes and behaviors of liquid knowledge workers, a three-pronged approach is required. The first is at the level of institutions with mechanisms like technology leadership and support for knowledge management. At the level of work group too there needs to be existence of supportive supervisors and peers. Finally, the important and many times overlooked component of individual-level psychological factors like psychological capital and self-efficacy cannot be overestimated. For example, Jha and Pandey (2016) in their study highlight how individual level variables like trust in management and psychological safety mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and knowledge sharing behavior.

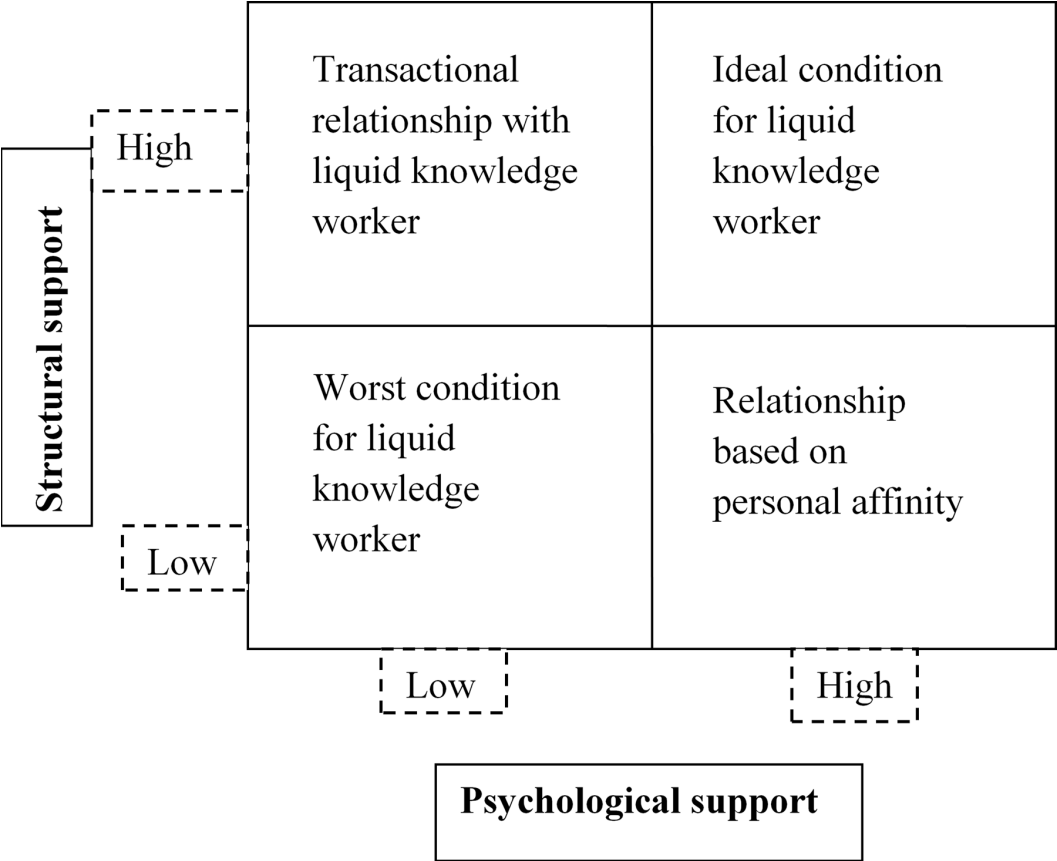
The above discussion can also be used to classify the organizational support into structural (technology leadership, support for knowledge management) and psychological (self-efficacy and psychological capital) ones. Taking inspiration from previous studies (Pandey, 2018) that have used matrix structure to provide insights into the complex phenomenon, we propose the matrix for management and retention (in the form repeated future transactions) of liquid knowledge workers (see Figure 1).

An approach where neither structural nor psychological support is provided by the organization will neither attract liquid knowledge workers and nor retain them. Due to VUCA business environment and extreme competition, a liquid worker by nature is a priced asset and organizations cannot expect an exchange without offering anything. The second approach is where organizations provide technical support only, this is a common approach and leads to a transactional relationship with liquid knowledge workers. In the context of the business environment and competitive pressures it translates to the highest bidder wins. The third approach which is common in small family-owned businesses is where liquid knowledge worker is provided psychological support but lesser structural support due to less formalization in the organization itself. In this case, the liquid knowledge worker is attached to the person and not the organization. The best approach is to have both structural and psychological support which leads to attraction and retention of these liquid knowledge workers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The guest editors hope that this special issue proves to be a stepping stone for future research on flexible knowledge workforce and its management. There has been a shift from life-long employment to relatively short term and changing employment practices. A special attention is needed for the customization of human resources policies, practices and systems to cater to the needs of this growing form of employment relationship. Further comparative studies between liquid and permanent employees can also help in delineating the management strategies for both groups. The guest editors encourage researchers to attach greater emphasis on studying the behaviors and motivational factors for flexible knowledge workforce as it is going to be the face at least for the next decade.

Figure 1. Matrix for management of liquid knowledge worker



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