Distrust of Employers, Collectivism, and Union Efficacy

Jack Fiorito, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA
Daniel G. Gallagher, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA

ABSTRACT

This study examines relations between indicators of knowledge work and worker attitudes toward employers, collective action, and union efficacy. Previous writing on these relations are used to develop hypotheses. Data are drawn from the 2009 Young Workers Survey. Results fail to show any statistically significant main effect relations between knowledge work indicators and the worker attitudes examined, despite a sample size sufficient to detect at least medium effect sizes. Further, there is very limited support for moderator effects. A discussion section discusses limitations, implications, and issues for future research.

Keywords: Collective Action, Distrust, Knowledge Work, Union Efficacy, Worker Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Although many have identified shifts toward “knowledge work” as an important development in the transformation of employment relationships, the nature of associated changes and their implications are less clear. Previous scholarly writing has touched upon employment relations implications of knowledge work in a variety of ways. Recent contributions have ranged from examinations of concepts surrounding hypothetical knowledge worker strikes (Healy, 2009), knowledge worker “controllability” (Kanter, 2009), innovation and trust between employer and union representatives (Laplante & Harrison, 2008), knowledge worker rhetoric or discourse (Casey 2004), complex relations between knowledge work and contingent work (Gallagher, 2008), whether knowledge work implies new forms of conflict (Martin & Moldoveanu, 2003), and the broad employment relations implications of knowledge-based work in an increasingly global economy (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2010). The premise that the nature of work affects worker attitudes and employment relations outcomes has deep roots (see Fiorito & Gallagher, 1986).

This study focuses on three worker perceptions that provide a sampling of worker attitudes on employment relations issues, specifically: 1) Distrust of employers to treat employees fairly; 2) Relative efficacy of collective and individual approaches to solving workplace problems; and, 3) Whether unionized workers are better off or worse off than nonunion workers. These are dependent variables for this study.

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Issues of definitional uncertainty surround the concepts of knowledge work and workers. Even within the context of employment law there is no precise definition of knowledge work or knowledge workers. In this study, definitional uncertainty is addressed by considering alternative and potentially complementary criteria, including: 1) Working with computer technologies; 2) Educational level; and, 3) Occupation. That is, we examine the sensitivity of results for the employment relations outcomes described above to alternative operational definitions of knowledge work. In other words: How robust are the results to alternative definitions of “knowledge work”?

The next section reviews selected concepts and prior studies relating to knowledge work and workers. This provides a basis for initial hypotheses about knowledge work’s relation to phenomena such as employee distrust in employers, attitudes toward group and individual approaches, and the efficacy of unionization. A subsequent section reviews methodology issues. This is followed by results and concluding sections.

LITERATURE, THEORY, AND HYPOTHESES

Despite the lack of definitional precision for “knowledge work” there exists a considerable body of academic and practitioner literature which touts the centrality of knowledge work and knowledge-based industries (e.g., Blackler, 1995; Casey, 2004; Mosco, 2008). As noted by Soete (2001), the present debate surrounding the “knowledge-driven,” “learning,” or “knowledge-based” economy or “information society” suggests that the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is ushering society into an entirely new or “post-industrial” era. This is a new era where value-added has shifted away from material production and handling towards greater emphasis on “immaterial content” (Soete, 2001: 146).

The growth of information-based systems has placed upon organizations the need to effectively identify and secure workers with a requisite level of knowledge-based skills. As noted by Agarwal and Ferratt (2006), firms may use a number of different strategies for the acquisition of information technology (IT) workers. Two extreme human resource (HR) strategies identified by Agarwal and Ferratt (2006) are a long-term investment (LTI) strategy and the short-term producer (STP) strategy. The former approach is representative of an internal labor market system where emphasis is placed on employer commitment to retention, based upon on-going skill or knowledge-based training. In contrast, the STP strategy is much more a market-based approach, where highly knowledgeable IT workers are hired on a project-only basis. Under this latter approach, the focus is on extracting maximum productivity from knowledge workers, by allowing considerable worker discretion over how the work is done, but this approach provides little or no employment security.

Ironically, for many knowledge workers, the environment of the post-industrial era can be viewed as one of both opportunity and restrictions. During the time of the so called “industrial era,” possessing high skill or knowledge levels would certainly be associated with a market advantage that could be enjoyed by workers. Such skills were relatively rare and workers possessing them were difficult to recruit or replace. Today it is less certain that knowledge translates into a traditional market advantage. Most notably, the growth of the “knowledge” economy has coincided with greater organizational emphasis upon “flexibility” (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004: Reilly, 1998). As part of this phenomenon, at many organizational levels, labor now has become, by design, an increasingly variable rather than a fixed cost. In particular there is a growing tension between the importance and need for knowledge workers and organizational commitment. Not only have organizations turned to the use of contingent or fixed-term contracts, but as evidenced in the experience at Microsoft, employers have resorted to the reassignment of knowledge work-
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