Chapter V

The Organization’s Human Infrastructure

Introduction

The integral component of the organizational infrastructure is its people. Without people, even a virtual organization could not function. People give any organization life, purpose, and its “raison d’être.” This is even more true when we focus on knowledge management. Ultimately, whatever the type of knowledge (e.g., tacit or explicit) with which we are concerned with, organizational knowledge cannot exist without people (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Swan, Scarbrough, & Preston, 1999). In the knowledge economy, the knowledge worker, a term coined to describe an expert decision maker who has significant autonomy, has a critical role to the success, growth, and sustainability of the organization (Beckman, 1999; Cortada, 1998).

People within an organization are influenced by the culture and structure of the organization (Martin, 1992)—its microenvironment. In order for knowledge management to be embraced and flourish in an organization the underlying culture and structure of that organization must be clearly understood. Further, it is important to understand the leadership and management style of the organization (Senge, 1996). Thus, key elements that together form the unit level of the organization’s human infrastructure include the issues of culture, structure, leadership, and management, and team dynamics. If special attention is not paid to these components, the KM initiative will be doomed to failure.
Knowledge Workers

In the knowledge economy, knowledge workers are considered the most valuable resource. Reich (1992) argues that it is only through the working together of knowledge workers that true competitive advantage can ever be achieved. The term “knowledge worker” was first coined by Peter Drucker in the 1960s (Cortada, 1998; Drucker, 1993, 1999). More recently in the 1990s, Drucker and others have repeatedly noted that we have entered a period where the basic resource is knowledge and the knowledge worker is to play a central role in organizations (Cortada, 1998; Drucker, 1993, 1999; Wickramasinghe & Ginzberg, 2001; Wigg, 1993). The most significant distinguishing aspect of knowledge workers is their ownership of the means of production (i.e., their expertise and knowledge) (Wickramasinghe & Ginzberg, 2001).

The rise of the knowledge worker in the current workforce is primarily due to the fact that since the 1990s, this type of worker has been a key employee in the business world and most job growth in developed nations has been for people with these skills (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Drucker, 1993, 1999). While the existence of knowledge workers is not unique to the knowledge economy, the important difference between knowledge workers in previous ages, as apposed to knowledge workers in the knowledge economy, is that they did not dominate the workforce as they do today (Probst et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is only now in the knowledge economy that we have a knowledge worker, Bill Gates, as the wealthiest man in the world (Allee, 1997; Probst et al., 1998; Scott Morton, 1991).

Apart from talent, intelligence, training, and often extensive expertise required in execution of their professions, the majority of knowledge workers share other distinctive characteristics (Kanter, 1999; Wickramasinghe & Ginzberg, 2001): they constitute the most valuable asset to the organization and their work activities are complex, non-repetitive and, hence, typically difficult to evaluate (Kanter, 1999; Wickramasinghe & Ginzberg, 2001). Hence, knowledge workers are identified as possessing specialized skills and training that have taken time and considerable investment to develop. In addition, the knowledge worker plays a key role, since the decisions [primarily unstructured decisions (Wickramasinghe, 2003)] made by him or her have a significant impact on the organization in which he or she is employed. Knowledge work can be defined as non-repetitive, non-routine work that entails substantial levels of cognitive activity (Wickramasinghe & Ginzberg, 2001). Thus, knowledge work is challenging and non-routine, or it can be described as relating to the solving of non-programmed tasks or unstructured decisions. Knowledge workers then can be defined as a select subset of employees who own the means of production (i.e., their knowledge (ibid.)). They possess specialized skills and training, which they have acquired by investing significant resources (time, money) for their education. In addition, knowledge workers are empowered and have the
Strategic Information Systems Planning
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/strategic-information-systems-planning/212136?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/strategic-information-systems-planning/212136?camid=4v1a)

The Role and Value of Diversity to Learning Organizations and Innovation
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-role-and-value-of-diversity-to-learning-organizations-and-innovation/177652?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-role-and-value-of-diversity-to-learning-organizations-and-innovation/177652?camid=4v1a)