Chapter X

Social Relations and Knowledge Management Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This chapter proposes a new hypothesis to the refusal to cooperate from qualified professionals and supports it with five arguments drawn from the fields of sociology of work and professions. The management of knowledge (KM) is based, among other things, on a system for pooling knowledge to which employees must contribute. Nevertheless, the experts of KM persistently note the relative failure of knowledge-pooling practices, particularly among the highly qualified professionals. Some experts have little to say about this issue and the scarce explanations they provide are highly unsatisfactory sociologically speaking and inspired by a folk psychology discourse. Sociology of work and professions, particularly, provide the grounds for alternative and more solid analysis of the phenomenon.

Since it is claimed that, in the so-called knowledge economy, knowledge is the most crucial economic resource in the struggle against fierce international competition, it follows that management must pay particular attention to how it manages this resource. But what does “manage” mean in this context? Does it mean promoting its development by investing in training, for example? Promoting its transfer by encouraging creativity, initiative, or teamwork, by favoring the setting up of communities of practice (if saying so makes any sense…)? Promoting the disclosure and banking of knowledge or information to make it more easily available to all, to increase access to it for the greatest number while at the same time conserving and accumulating it over time? Does it extend to appropriation by the group? Or appropriation by management? Given that these...
questions have not been formally answered to date, all these management attitudes are seen to varying degrees.

A so-called new discipline has sprung up since the mid-eighties, known as knowledge management (KM). KM system implementation and management specialists are producing a growing body of work, consisting primarily of handbooks and manuals. Management consultants can’t seem to get enough of it and will willingly tell whoever hires them that KM is the key to the constant innovation that will help them maintain their competitive position in today’s market:

A horizontal reading of these different business strategies shows, however, that this new competitiveness is based primarily on innovation. [...] The secret to an organization’s success lies in its capacity to promote processes that enable interaction between different sources of individual or compartmentalized knowledge in order to generate new collective knowledge that provides a basis for diffuse innovation. \(1 + 1 = 3!\) [...] To summarize, an organization’s capacity to innovate is rooted in its capacity to transform its knowledge assets, which are organized and individualized to varying degrees, into “collective strategic intelligence.” (Jacob & Pariat, 2000, p. 10-12; my emphasis) [translation]

The following chapter presents a sociologist’s critical look at this body of work in which very few sociologists has so far shown little interest, whether to contribute to it or to review it. I must underline noticeable exceptions in Great Britain, that address the questions raised here without reviewing this body of work (per se: Robertson & O’Malley Hammersley, 2000, p. 242; Scarbrough, 1999, p. 6; Swan, Robertson, & Bresnen, 2001; Wilson, 2002). Given the popularity of this phenomenon in the world of work today, particularly since 1997 (Wilson, 2002), this lack of attention should arouse anyone’s curiosity.

One of the means that the KM experts propose to manage knowledge is a system for pooling knowledge or information to which employees must contribute. I will be looking here at a phenomenon that concerns both theorists and practitioners of KM, that is, the fact that a significant proportion of workers do not contribute to these knowledge-pooling systems. KM may be implemented in companies from all sorts of industries, employing workers with very different qualifications; I have restricted my study to the case of highly qualified professionals hired by companies supplying very specialized goods and services to enterprises (B2B) using extremely sophisticated production techniques. The professionals I will be discussing are computer specialists and programmers. In Canada, they are not members of reserved-title professions, though they share many characteristics typical of professionals (university degree, shared body of specialized knowledge, high degree of qualification, close contact with customers and dedication to ensuring customer satisfaction, discretionary power in the choice of means to carry out work and in the decision-making process in performing tasks, in the judgments and opinions issued about the work and, in some cases, in the ends being pursued also), but not all of them (they do not have a professional licensing body, a code of ethics, a reserved title, and self-regulation of the rules of membership: curriculum, certification and decertification of members, standards of practice, setting of rates or prices for work, penalties, peer assessment and immunity from outside control).

In this chapter, after providing a short definition of knowledge management, I will analyze and critique what KM promoters have to say about demanding that qualified professionals participate in knowledge-pooling systems, the relative lack of success of these practices and the explanations that we can deduce from the solutions they propose. I will then set out why I think these explanations are unsatisfactory in relation to what the sociology