Chapter 10

A New Perspective on Knowledge Management Research: The Role of Vocational Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management theories emphasize the role of knowledge work and knowledge workers in knowledge-intensive organizations. However, technologization has changed the knowledge work environment. Many knowledge workers create, process, and share simplified information in digitalized networks. This complicates the profession-based definitions of knowledge workers. This chapter contributes to the emerging concern about the future trends of knowledge management. First, the chapter suggests that knowledge management models ignore a large group of professionals possessing practical knowledge. These vocational professionals are considered a new target group for knowledge management. Vocational professionals' practical knowledge is worth managing since they operate with organizational core functions. Second, this chapter presents an alternative education-based categorization of workers. The different functions of KM are manifest in the three categories: a diminishing group of workers without professional qualifications, a large group of vocational professionals, and a group of workers with higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The term Knowledge Management (KM) has experienced inflation. It has been used in various contexts and for mixed purposes. The established insight is that the KM function includes knowledge creation, sharing, and utilization in organizations. The development of technological devices helps to fulfill this function. Modern KM can be seen as a general management tool with multiple meanings and vague definitions of both knowledge and management (Alvesson, Kärreman, & Swan, 2002). Contemporary KM is related to organizations and people with theoretical and expert knowledge.
achieved through higher education. For modern organizations, the most important resource is human capital including knowledge and education instead of capital and technology (Drucker, 2000). Organizations that are able to make their investments in human capital visible and prove to profit from it are appreciated by highly educated individuals both as investors and as potential labor. In this context, human capital can be seen as a factor of production and knowledge workers are considered entrepreneurs within an enterprise. Hence, knowledge workers face uncertainty in the labor market. The literature defines knowledge-intensive organizations as firms where highly educated workers are predominantly represented and work is considered intellectual (Alvesson, 2001). The products of these firms are supposed to be of high quality as a result of remarkable expertise.

The traditional insights related to KM, knowledge work, and knowledge workers are increasingly criticized. The changing environment of knowledge work questions the central role of workers with higher education and specialized expertise in KM models. Technologization has drained the contents of knowledge work. As a consequence, the traditional subject groups of KM research seem to lose their relevance. It is also difficult to define knowledge work according to professions since technological applications are widely used throughout organizations. The mission of this chapter is to contribute to KM research by suggesting a new target group: vocational professionals. This group of workers possesses concrete and relevant knowledge about the core functions and processes of organizations. The contemporary definitions of KM, knowledge work, and knowledge workers are briefly discussed; however, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a thorough discussion of these definitions. Finally, the chapter presents an alternative categorization of the labor force based on education instead of the traditional profession-based labeling.

BACKGROUND

It is argued that knowledge workers are an expanding group of labor. Many rich countries strongly advocate higher education (Alvesson, 2004). Knowledge workers are seen as a significant group in modern organizations (Drucker, 2000; Pyörölä, 2005). The definitions of knowledge workers are discussed widely, but the problem is their ambiguity and difficulty to apply them in practice. In general, knowledge workers are considered highly educated labor receiving, processing, and creating new knowledge with the help of information technology. These tasks are associated with special skills and competency. Generally, knowledge workers are expected to use intellectual abilities and make decisions. They are assumed to have autonomy, as well as a high hierarchical position, and they perform non-routine tasks (Pyörölä, 2005).

There are various definitions describing knowledge work. However, Pyörölä (2005) found some common characteristics in his review of knowledge work concepts, such as higher education, advanced skills, and utilizing information technology in the informational labor process. Modern knowledge work is part of the information society characterized as a complex, increasingly specialized multifactor field under continuous change. Information creation, processing, and sharing are important factors of production in this environment. Knowledge work, its output, and knowledge workers are defined through their information-intensiveness. Knowledge workers are dealing with processes instead of distinct tasks (Pyörölä, 2005). Communication systems, such as wireless mobile networks, social networks, the Internet, the Web, and audiovisual systems, have an important role in facilitating these tasks.

The impact of the above-mentioned definitions on KM theory is obvious. Contemporary KM models emphasize the managing of highly educated knowledge workers. The literature
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