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Motivation and Knowledge Workers

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Abstract

Knowledge workers are growing group of employees in both advanced and emerging economies. The major tool and resource of their work is knowledge. Due to its tacit dimension, knowledge is of intangible character. Knowledge work is done in heads of knowledge workers, it is non linear, difficult to capture. Even though knowledge workers are usually responsible professionals, wrong motivation can negatively influence their performance. Our previous researches on knowledge workers and their management show that managers of knowledge workers very often do not understand importance of proper motivation when working with this group of employees. The paper focuses on problematic of motivation of knowledge workers and represents first results of preliminary research we did in this field.

1. Introduction

Knowledge workers are growing group of employees in both advanced and emerging economies. Their specifics come from specifics of knowledge and knowledge work. Knowledge consists of so called explicit and tacit dimensions. Explicit dimension is the part of knowledge that can be formally expressed through some code, e.g. can be converted to data. The code differs based on the character of knowledge; language, script, pictures, formulas, notes represent typical examples of such scripts. These days we share explicit knowledge via ICT. Tacit dimension is partly or fully subconscious. It is the part of knowledge we develop through learning by doing and it is responsible

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for our practical activity. E.g. every practical activity has its own tacit knowledge behind. Tacit knowledge is difficult to separate from its human owner. Attempts to externalize it damage it.

Due to tacit knowledge, knowledge as a whole is of intangible character and makes management of knowledge workers difficult. The first trouble is that manager cannot control how knowledge worker works; e.g. he cannot control the process of work with knowledge as it is hidden in the brain of the knowledge worker and may be partly or fully subconscious. Looking at the surgeon operating on the patient, you can see that he made the cut. But you do not see why he did it and which knowledge, thinking processes and decisions the surgeon used to do that cut. If there was a mistake, when the cut is done, it is too late. Second, knowledge work may not be linear. It does not follow simple rules and individual solutions and ideas may come up to knowledge worker accidentally, usually when he is relaxed. Such "aha moments" that solve big problems often happen out of organization and cannot be controlled and managed intentionally. Third, as every knowledge worker knows, results of knowledge work may differ in short and long term period. What looked perfect in short term perspective becomes the problem in long term perspective and opposite. Fourth, many knowledge jobs are done under the stress and pressure, in lack of time. These and many other specifics of knowledge and knowledge work complicate management of knowledge workers.

Some organizations promote so called HSPALTA approach; e.g. hire smart people and leave them alone. This approach may work with some knowledge workers, but it may be dangerous with others. If nothing, manager of knowledge worker should control whether knowledge workers who work independently know what corporate objectives are if they and follow this direction.

Motivation of knowledge workers is a very specific topic. Literature says that knowledge workers are people who are usually highly motivated to perform well (Drucker, 1954, Davenport, 2005, Reboul et al., 2006), that they are able to decide themselves and manage their own activities (Suff & Reilly, 2005, Gummesson, 2002). But as different theories on motivation show that different people are motivated by different incentives. The same is applicable to knowledge workers. Taking into account specifics of knowledge work, motivation of knowledge workers is an important topic. Our previous researches on knowledge workers and their management show that managers of knowledge workers very often do not understand importance of proper motivation when working with this group of employees (Mládková, 2012a, b, Mládková, 2013).

The paper gives the theoretical background to the field of motivation and knowledge workers and offers analysis of the most interesting answers we got from our respondents, knowledge workers, in the first survey on this topic. This survey, though small and not representative, identifies interesting aspects of motivation of knowledge workers and helps us specify ideas on future research of this topic.

2. Literature Review And Hypotheses

2.1. Knowledge Workers

Literature on knowledge workers offers different definitions, concepts, classifications and ideas on who knowledge workers are. These ideas can be simplified to three approaches; conceptual approaches, job content approaches and data (industry) driven approaches. Conceptual approaches explain the term knowledge worker from the complex point of view. Employees' importance for an organization, his style of work with knowledge, education and other factors are taken into account (Drucker, 1954, Lowe, 2002, Davenport, 2005, Reboul et al, 2006). Data (industry) driven approaches see knowledge workers as all those who work in particular organizations or in particular sectors or institutions (Brinkley, Fauth, Mahdon & Theodoropoulou, 2009, Sveiby 1997). Job content approaches see knowledge workers as people who do a certain type of job (Toffler, 1990, Spira, 2008, Reich, 1992,Kidd, 1994). The classification to the approach is not exact. For example Reboul et al (2006) adopts conceptual approach but at the same time classifies knowledge workers to different groups by the nature of their work.

All across different approaches, authors see knowledge workers as people who:

- Are highly committed to what they do.
- Create, apply, and distribute knowledge.
- Appear more in some professions.
- Work in an autonomous fashion within fluid leadership structures.