



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

International Publications

Key Workplace Documents

10-2008

Managing Knowledge Workers

Olivier Serrat
Asian Development Bank

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/intl>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Key Workplace Documents at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact hlmdigital@cornell.edu.

Managing Knowledge Workers

Abstract

{Excerpt} A knowledge worker is someone who is employed because of his or her knowledge of a subject matter, rather than ability to perform manual labor. They perform best when empowered to make the most of their deepest skills.

Assumptions about people working in organizations are less and less tenable. One misleading notion is that they are subordinate employees retained around the clock; another is that they rely on their organization for livelihood and career. One hundred years ago, in the United States and Europe, the largest single group of workers labored in agriculture. Sixty years later, it consisted of technical, professional, and managerial people. Today, it is made up of knowledge workers who may practice at an organization but might not be its employees. And, if they are in full-time employment, fewer and fewer are subordinates.

What of it? Observers make out that working habits are shifting from lifetime employment in a single organization to portfolio work. Knowledge workers produce and distribute ideas and information rather than goods or services. They are individuals with different aspirations from the hierarchy-conscious personnel of the past; they are also mobile and they do leave. Hiring talented people is difficult. Keeping them is more difficult still. So, to plug the drain of human capital in a competitive knowledge economy, knowledge workers should be treated as an asset rather than as a cost. Preferably, they should be managed as though they were partners (or at least volunteers).

Keywords

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

Suggested Citation

Serrat, O. (2010). *Managing knowledge workers*. Washington, DC: Asian Development Bank.

Required Publisher's Statement

This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org)

Managing Knowledge Workers

by Olivier Serrat

A knowledge worker is someone who is employed because of his or her knowledge of a subject matter, rather than ability to perform manual labor. They perform best when empowered to make the most of their deepest skills.

Rationale

Assumptions about people working in organizations are less and less tenable. One misleading notion is that they are subordinate employees retained around the clock; another is that they rely on their organization for livelihood and career. One hundred years ago, in the United States and Europe, the largest single group of workers labored in agriculture. Sixty years later, it consisted of technical, professional, and managerial people. Today, it is made up of knowledge workers who may practice at an organization but might not be its employees. And, if they are in full-time employment, fewer and fewer are subordinates.

What of it? Observers make out that working habits are shifting from lifetime employment in a single organization to portfolio work. Knowledge workers produce and distribute ideas and information rather than goods or services. They are individuals with different aspirations from the hierarchy-conscious personnel of the past; they are also mobile and they do leave. Hiring talented people is difficult. Keeping them is more difficult still. So, to plug the drain of human capital in a competitive knowledge economy, knowledge workers should be treated as an asset rather than as a cost. Preferably, they should be managed as though they were partners (or at least volunteers).

Managing Talent

Making knowledgeable people perform is not a matter of making them work harder or more skillfully. Naturally, they are dedicated and such interventions are beside the point. Rather, the managerial task relates to removing obstacles to performance and then channeling efforts into areas that will contribute to the accomplishment of an organization's objective. For that reason, managing talented workers for performance is best understood as a process of influence. To begin, establish a framework in terms of culture, structure, and style of management in which the talent of knowledge workers can flourish. In exercising this process, accommodate these people's preferred ways of working. The result is that knowledge workers understand, identify with, and see how their own contribution can be enhanced. They put their best abilities to the test. They challenge and achieve. To build such a framework,

- Recognize outstanding talent wherever it is found.
- Establish clear task objectives and performance standards in consultation with each



knowledge worker.

- Extend incentives, rewards, and reinforcements that meet the motivational patterns of each knowledge worker.
- Provide opportunities for improvement.

As organizations redesign in the knowledge economy, they will have to quickly address the elemental issue of motivation. Consider the major rewards typically provided to workers for effort (irrespective of the type of worker). Wages, for instance, cannot be consumed at work. Fringe benefits (such as leave, health and medical insurance, pay for overtime, or proceeds from stock purchase plans) yield satisfaction only when workers leave the organization. And, sadly, promotion often means little more than a bigger office, a resounding title, or a special parking place. Is it surprising then that so many workers perceive their job to be a form of punishment? The field of motivation is still wide open: but the organizations that thrive will have (more appetizing) menus of benefit options from which knowledge workers can choose.

...With Knowledge Managers

Certainly, knowledge workers require knowledge managers, not bosses. These new-era managers need to set and enforce on themselves exacting standards for their performance of those functions that determine ability to perform. Time and again, traditional managers exercise no leadership at all but only position power. Many reach the top by being tough and self-affirmative or by being the kind of person that others feel safe in following or promoting. Yet managing knowledge workers requires that managers themselves act as good follower and team player as well as leader and technologist. Since the process of influencing the performance of knowledge workers is mainly developmental, they need also to hone skills in appraising, coaching, mentoring, and providing feedback. One measure of their effectiveness will be by the quality of the (internal and external) relationships that they create.

The knowledge economy is pruning status, power, and upward mobility from the managerial role. From now on, would-be new-era managers will be asked to reply convincingly to a simple question: Why should a knowledge worker want to be managed by you?

For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

.....
Asian Development Bank

ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members—48 from the region. In 2007, it approved \$10.1 billion of loans, \$673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to \$243 million.

.....
Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

.....
The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent. ADB encourages printing or copying information exclusively for personal and noncommercial use with proper acknowledgment of ADB. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ADB.

Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions

