A Proposal for a new Framework for a Great Place to Work: A Cognitive-collective View on Knowledge Work Motivation

Ingo Bildstein, Stefan Güldenberg

Chair in International Management
University of Liechtenstein
Fuerst-Franz-Josef-Strasse
FL-9400 Vaduz
ingo.bildstein@hochschule.li
stefan.gueldenberg@hochschule.li

Abstract: Management in the industrial economy focused on increasing the productivity of single manual workers, because it was easy to determine individual contributions to tangible outputs. Hence carrot-and-stick motivational schemes did a good job in spurring individual work effort. Nowadays however, that motivational approach is outdated and counterproductive, due to the intangibility of knowledge work in- and output. Fostering of non-reward-contingent voluntary efforts to deliver outstanding results is therefore decisive for making management of knowledge a success in these days. At the same time group processes must be considered, due to the growing importance of expert teams for complex problem solving. Most importantly, becoming an attractive organization for experts is an important toehold to gain sustainable competitive advantage, since it allows for attracting and retaining the 21st century’s most valuable asset. The paper at hand therefore takes a cognitive-collective view on knowledge work motivation, by showing how a beneficial perception of peers and superiors together with a culture conductive to collaboration overcome the Tayloristic relict, meaning focusing in productivity enhancement initiatives on experts as isolated individuals.

1 Introduction

Knowledge is a resource created by humans acting in social relationships: Creative ideas have to be discussed with other people to become modified and enriched. This contribution aims at encouraging to “undertake some social engineering to understand better what is going on” within groups of knowledge workers [Da05]. In addition [NTH08] state that “knowledge as a management resource cannot be understood without understanding the interactions of the human beings who create it”. To be more specific, Nonaka’s concept of a knowledge-creating company [No91] centers around a collective of knowledge workers, in which generosity is prevalent, people feel recognized as distinct individuals, and informal, honest communication is commonplace. However, practical knowledge group work is not always functioning without any difficulty due to frictions within the group’s climate. Following [dD08] creative generation, dissemination, and integration of information are driven by two global motivations, “epistemic motivation” and “social motivation”, which are conceptualized as distinct and
orthogonal factors. Epistemic motivation refers to the willingness to expend effort to achieve a thorough, rich, and accurate understanding of a question at hand. And social motivation is defined as the individual preference for outcome distributions between oneself and other group members and can be “proself”, i.e., the individual is concerned with own outcomes only, or “prosocial”, i.e., the individual is concerned with joint outcomes and fairness. Blindly fostering prosocial motivation alone cannot be the solution to the group climate problem, since when groups become too cohesive, they fall short in maintaining capability of action. Too much harmony and consensus lead to the paralysis by analysis problem, meaning that group members invest excessively in the growth of their knowledge – but do not come to grips with practical demands. Hence group discussions that are at the same time intensive, friendly, and critical make knowledge grow. But unfortunately groups tend to either discuss unfriendly and critical or friendly and uncritical. Therefore there is need for research on how to establish a cooperative group climate beneficial for both friendly and challenging idea exchange between group members [Sw96]. According to [Sj96], the propulsive power for knowledge creation is the continued interaction between individual experts’ conscious information processing and group-level institutionalized practices. The study of [Sg10] delivers empirical proof for the advantageousness of experiencing oneness with one’s social group for resulting cognitive performance, because according to the “social tuning hypothesis” stimuli that are assumed to be experienced by fellow group members are more prominent in individual cognition. Matters are complicated because humans are group-living animals caring for advantageous social relations; a good example is given by [ELW03]. These researchers show that a mild form of social exclusion (not getting involved by other players in a virtual ball-tossing game) leads to social pain. And [dW09] use the “hostile cognitive bias”-construct to explain why social rejection causes aggression, leading socially excluded people to “see the world through blood-colored glasses”. To satisfy the human “need to belong” [BL95], initial investments are required, since the formation of good relationships needs time for the gradual accumulation of intimacy and shared experience. A beneficial organizational culture therefore should be supportive for experts’ levels of motivation in that it helps them socializing [SFi03] prove that positive employee relations effectively serve as an intangible and enduring asset, because they are related to improved financial firm performance. Firms therefore need to focus on their social dimensions to enhance their performance capability [vM04], or as [DB00] puts it: “People want to feel engaged, so help make that happen”. The [G10] model is a promising approach to merge the above considerations about fostering beneficial cognitions about the knowledge worker collective into a coherent whole. “Trust” is the most important construct within that framework, because good interpersonal relations do not evolve as a matter of course, rather persistence and the “willingness to be voluntarily vulnerable based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another party” [Gdu07], over a long time is decisive for them to burgeon and develop. And [Pl05] adds that professional guidance is essential for trust creation, if there is no personal sympathy or friendship to start from. The [G10] model states that trust is composed of three sub-dimensions, “respect”, “credibility” and “fairness”. These constructs together with “pride” and “camaraderie” create an organizational climate that makes the difference between corporate success and failure: “A great place to work is one in which you trust the people you work for, have pride in what you do, and enjoy the people you work with”. According to [HKO10], pride shifts
the perception of self-other similarity to strong others, therefore stimulating people to emulate high-performing people as role models. Concluding from the importance of enjoyable coworker relations within the [G10] model, it is no longer prosperous management of individual work satisfaction that matters for becoming an attractive organization in the knowledge age. On the contrary, today’s great workplaces depend on management’s ability to optimize inter-expert relationships and simultaneously fostering the emotional bond to the employer. However, classical motivation theories focus on individual inducement to take and maintain action. That’s why [HLD04] conclude that the focus on knowledge workers as isolated individuals whose productivity must be improved is a Tayloristic relict. But in the case of brainwork, productivity improvement is linked to relationship improvement to develop social capital [AK02]. The next chapter therefore reports about the ongoing shift of emphasis away from extrinsic towards intrinsic and social incentives in knowledge worker motivation.

2 Rethinking Motivation

According to [FO01], “there are few subjects in both theory and practice of business management to be of such undisputed importance for entrepreneurial success as motivation”. But the ideal incentive arrangement is still fuzzy, that is why [HLD04] blame that “thus far, researchers and managers alike have a very limited understanding of what makes knowledge workers tick”. Seemingly failed conditioning trials showed that animals engage in playful and curiosity-driven behaviors in the absence of explicit reinforcement, and that simply performing such exploratory activities is rewarding for its own sake. A work-life related example of such intrinsic motivation is working because of the enjoyable satisfaction derived from the occupational activity. [Pdh10] builds on the self-regulation theory developed by [RD00], which proposes three innate psychological needs, namely the “need for social belongingness”, the “need for competence”, and the “need for autonomy” and identifies three factors, which lead in combination to improved performance based on increased intrinsic motivation. The first [Pdh10] factor is congruent with the [RD00] conceptualization of “autonomy”, defined here as the desire to be self directed. The second factor is called “mastery”, it means that people have a strong urge to get better at the things they are doing. And simply improving one's skills in an iterative process is hence very satisfying. Finally there must be the third component, called “purpose”, meaning that people want to find a higher meaning in their jobs. An example of extrinsic motivation, on the contrary, is working to cash in the salary; money almost always serves as a means to an end (but is not an end in itself), [Om10]. For quite a long time it was assumed that internal and external motivation are independent of one another. This being the case, one could attempt to motivate an expert intrinsically by making his job as interesting as possible and simultaneously extrinsically by promising a monetary bonus. But unfortunately there is under certain circumstances a trade-off between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: If someone gets an extra financial reward for an activity that he inherently is already eagerly willing to do, this leads to destruction of intrinsic motivation, as for instance shown empirically by [LGN73]. In the social sciences this phenomenon is called the hidden costs of reward or the corruption effect of extrinsic motivation. Bruno Frey into-
duced this concept to economics and coined the term crowding out for it. Following [SC10], it is important to consider not only incentives, contingent benefits upon individuals’ effort provided by the firm, but also to ponder over experts’ motives, their subjective preferences for such incentives. Economists focus on incentives, but the role of motives has hitherto remained largely unexplored. The next section describes factors supportive for an exchange of ideas between team members in a psychological safe [Ed08] environment, where success for sure gets rewarded – but failure is not penalized. Lynchpin is the importance of volition, “the absolute commitment to achieving something” [GB03]. And wholeheartedly wanting to walk the extra mile together with a bunch of enjoyable fellows goes much further than any traditional motivation effort.

3 Fostering of Volition in Organizations

There are two possibilities to bring about coordination in teamwork, either by an affiliation-related dimension, which [Sw96] calls “congruence”, the mutual readiness to cooperate, or by “power”, meaning to push a decision through by means of authority. Power use has negative effect on knowledge creation hence it should be avoided. Moreover, a high performing team cannot be reached without substantial congruence. That is why social control systems, “in which common agreements exist among people what constitutes appropriate attitudes and behavior” [Oc89], are more suitable to influence group processes. And astonishingly, with formal systems people often have a sense of external constraint which is binding and unsatisfying, but with social controls “we often feel as though we have great autonomy, even though paradoxically we are conforming much more”. In addition, facilitation of a supportive informal organization leads to the genesis of a “fully functioning ba” [GH07]: A “lived place”, where “the knowledge creation process is given time and space to materialize”. And [Sp90] states that “building an organization’s culture and shaping its evolution is the unique and essential function of leadership” to give room for creation of an important economic resource called identity, which triggers discretionary extra-role behavior advantageous to the organization. The research of [MS10] identifies two critical attributes essential for overcoming work-to-rule behavior and to boost volition. First, “engagement”, the level of personal connection toward the employing firm and its mission, must be fostered. The second decisive building block is called “aspiration” – the extent to which the person desires job recognition, advancement, and future rewards – and the degree to which what the individual wants aligns with what the company wants for that person. Those authors’ basic idea is fine, but unfortunately the construct “engagement” is imprecise, because “the psychological relationship between individual and organization has been conceptualized in terms of identification and in terms of (affective) commitment” [vKS06]. It is important to bear in mind that “identification is different from commitment in that identification reflects the self-definitional aspect of organizational membership whereas commitment does not”. Commitment is thus more contingent on social exchange processes that presume that individual and organization are separate entities psychologically, whereas identification reflects psychological oneness. The term “engagement” used by [MS10] clearly goes into the direction of “affective commitment”, [AM90, M02] which is perhaps a more suitable description of that emotional link. This can go even to such lengths that experts start to identify themselves with their employing organization, [vK04]. According to [vD07], organization-based
identification motivates efforts on behalf of the collective. Moreover, social identification implies a psychological merging of self and group that leads individuals to see the self as similar to other members of the collective and to take the collective’s interest to heart. That emotional bond stops experts not only from leaving, but makes them become engaged members of a productive and energized workforce. The term “aspiration” used by [MS10] is easier to understand in the context of the psychological contract theory, [Rdm95, Rdm04]. Psychological contracts are implicit contracts, i.e. unwritten agreements between employer and employees consisting of individual employee beliefs about the mutual exchange relationship between employer and employee. These contracts are also promissory. According to [DR04] “mutuality”, the degree to which the two parties agree on their interpretations of promises and commitments each party has made and accepted, and “reciprocity”, referring to in how far the contributions made by one party obligate the other one to provide an appropriate return, are key characteristics for them. Moreover, the work by [HS09] shows a possible way to manage psychological contracts. Put simply, metacognition means “thinking about thinking”. The term describes a higher-order, cognitive process that serves to organize what individuals know and recognize about themselves, tasks, situations, and their environment. Metacognitive structures are therefore integrations of subjective knowledge about cognition and regulation of cognition – and these can vary gradually over time, given personal experience and self-reflection. Hence they are change- and also manageable. It is also interesting that [JKN98] add that “the contents and origins of metacognition are inherently social”.

4 Conclusions

In today’s knowledge-intensive environment, it is impossible for any one person to know enough to solve increasingly complex and interdependent problems alone. Therefore knowledge work is often about human interaction in teams of experts. Hence fostering and harnessing that collective brainpower becomes an important source to gain competitive advantage for knowledge-based organizations. This issue is under-researched, since some knowledge based companies simply apply what [Da05] calls the “HSPALTA” approach. This acronym stands for “hire smart people and leave them alone”. There is a rub in it, since simply selecting talented people, and hoping that they will pull themselves together in a self organized way, is wishful thinking. Thus interdisciplinary research is needed to develop guidelines to provide knowledge managers with empirically sound tools to allow them to make good use of the human resources entrusted to their care. The central issue is how to build cultures of trust. And an important supportive factor lies in taking care of and managing the emotional bond to the employing firm. To be more specific, future research should be guided by analyzing the following topics:

1. Innovative research-tools have to be developed that are capable of eliciting both knowledge workers’ subjective experience of the organizational climate and both their perception and emotional sensation of coworker- and supervisor-relationships. The fundamental problem with traditional questionnaire approaches (such as the analysis conducted by [G10]) is that items work on a rational level – and are hence unsuited to capture half- or even unaware
evaluations. Hence, qualitative approaches should be more illuminative to gain insights.

2. Successful social engineering has great potential to make knowledge worker collectives more productive in performing their tasks by improving interpersonal relationships of the experts involved. This is due to the fact that group knowledge work is very iterative and improvisational, making it mandatory to perform it in good personal chemistry. It hence becomes decisive to find organizational means for creation of a climate conductive to knowledge sharing. [Msc06] show in this regard empirically in the aerospace industry that product development performance can be improved by enhancing communication flows through enhanced networked relationships between team members. But as [Da05] puts it: “While knowledge worker performance is critical, we know little about how high performers get information and knowledge from other people, learn from their experience, and solve problems in their work. (…) Thus far we know little about the attribute of those social networks.”

3. Last but not least, the research of [dV05] shows an increasing divergence between people- and firm-interest. This trend is a serious problem, since knowledge workers have to be hundred percent committed to their job to produce high-quality output. At the same time attempts to motivate people always give themselves an aura of manipulation. And if such efforts are all too clumsy, they backfire and wreak havoc by making experts check out mentally. Therefore, the key to lastingly motivate experts to deliver top performance lies not in drilling them trick-or-treat, but to honestly put straight that working for a knowledge company is in peoples’ own best interest. Luckily, there are already promising initial empirical studies available to depart from in answering the above research topics. [No10] describes “Waigaya at Honda”. In this team-building technique people spend three days and three nights together in a good hotel with good food and with hot springs. This pleasurable environment gets people out of their daily routines and permits continuous dialogue between them. Bad mouthing of the boss is explicitly allowed to relieve frustration from people – and to allow the start of a constructive conflict discussion. Because there is no escape, individuals gut feelings emerge. Another illustrative example gives the research of [Er10], who simply asked his subjects what job-related factors caused strongest dissatisfaction. That simple question triggered an avalanche, and people reported their genuine unhappiness with certain circumstances. Of course it would also be interesting to ask subjects more provoking questions, such as: “Which supervisor do you dislike most?” Another good example for a provoking item is asking: “Would you be willing to pay out-of pocket for a measure of further education required to improve your job performance?” If people take the bait, they assumedly report their straightforward attitudes regarding emotional evaluation and loyalty to their current employer. Provoking questions do suffer from a social desirability bias – but after all they deliver valuable information regarding where to look for improvement opportunities. Besides the risk of getting socially desirable answers is much higher, if people are asked how eager they are about their current jobs, since they get invited to confabulate about some ideal cloud-cuckoo-land. The two mentioned empirical contributions are based on a cognitive-collective approach, because interviewed people start to ponder over their cognitive representation of their peers and superiors. In addition, many people have an image of humans as having “the mind of a god and the motives of a brute” [HP08]. Though this view is clearly wrong, it shows that the link between motivation and cognition is an important area of future research.
List of Literature


[dV05] de Vulpian, A.: Listening to Ordinary People: The Process of Civilization on the way to a new Society, Reflections, 6, 6/7, 1 – 19, 2005


[No10] Nonaka, I.: Key Note Speech, International Knowledge in Organizations Conference, Monte Verità, Ascona, Switzerland, 2010


