

# How to Lead, Manage and Motivate Knowledge Workers?

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💡 This article discusses various strategies for managing knowledge workers effectively. It covers the definition and characteristics of knowledge workers, the importance of technology and knowledge management platforms like PHPKB, and strategies for motivation and leadership. The article emphasizes the need for managers to adapt to the unique requirements of knowledge workers, balancing authority with sensitivity, and recognizing their expertise and motivations.

**Knowledge workers are the core of an organization.**

The ideas, experiences, interpretations, and judgments of knowledge workers keep business, economy, and society progressing. They invent new products, develop new strategies, lead negotiations, and help keep businesses ahead of their competitors.

## Knowledge Workers

A knowledge worker is someone who is employed because of his or her knowledge of a subject, rather than the ability to perform manual labor. The term knowledge worker was first coined by Peter Drucker in his book, *The Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959). He defined knowledge workers as high-level workers who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge, acquired through formal training, to develop products and services. They include professionals in information technology fields, such as programmers, web designers, system analysts, technical writers, and researchers. Knowledge workers are also comprised of pharmacists, public accountants, engineers, architects, lawyers, physicians, scientists, financial analysts, and design thinkers.

They perform best when empowered to make the most of their deepest skills. Knowledge workers have high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution, or application of knowledge. Some have defined a knowledge worker as “anyone tasked with continual innovation and creativity.”<sup>1</sup> Other researchers have stated that knowledge workers “bring to an organization their prior education, experience, knowledge, and skills, and as they interact within the organization they draw on this experience to develop their skills and knowledge further, thus adding to their human capital and to the value of the organization.”<sup>2</sup> Combining the two definitions, it would be fair to say that knowledge workers are important to a company due to both the immediate and future impacts that their abilities can produce when working toward organizational goals.



From a broader perspective, knowledge workers are also referred to as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). From the vantage point of a leader, a knowledge worker is an employee who knows more about the job than the leader does. Very often, knowledge workers have considerably more subject matter expertise than their leaders, as a function of working through highly technical tasks day-to-day and/or a specialized educational background. Organizations had just started to see a change from manual labor to jobs that need top levels of expertise, education, and experience.

*Knowledge workers believe they are paid to be effective, not to work 9 to 5, and that smart businesses will "strip away everything that gets in their knowledge workers' way." Those that succeed will attract the best performers, securing "the single biggest factor for competitive advantage." [🐦](#)*

— Peter Drucker



Every job demands a certain amount of knowledge working from nearly everyone, even those whose jobs don't require any special creativity still have to understand new software programs and technology to perform even basic administrative duties. The results (spreadsheets to be created, reports to be filed and distributed) are more concrete than in knowledge work. It can't be said that marketing team members are knowledge workers, and production staff is not; Statements like this may create the impression, some jobs are better than others. All work is knowledge work, to a greater or lesser degree.

## Managing Talent

The work performed by knowledge workers is mostly intangible and often invisible. Therefore, it is not possible to quantify the amount of knowledge a person creates or uses. For instance, judgments people make in a day, the relationships network develop, and the ideas they invent can't be quantified.

**Knowledge worker productivity** is the critical issue to being able to leverage your organization's strengths in real-time. Making knowledgeable people perform is not a matter of making them work harder or more skillfully by telling them what to do. Naturally, they are dedicated and such interventions are beside the point. Rather, the managerial task relates to removing obstacles to performance such as providing opportunities that they would not be able to have on their own and then channeling efforts into areas that will contribute to the accomplishment of an organization's aim. Managing knowledge workers for performance is best understood as a **process of influence**. 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, and as result knowledge workers understand, identify

with, and see how their own contribution can be enhanced. To build such a framework:

## Technology Driven Approach

Knowledge workers need to use technology to keep track of everything they need to know. As a manager, make sure your knowledge workers have access to appropriate technology. This could be something as straightforward as providing them with access to the Internet or providing them some specific tool such as SPSS software for a statistician.

Only providing technology is not enough, training people to use the technology is also part of a managerial job. For example, deploying a knowledge-sharing tool for effective team collaborations but not providing the basic training to employees will waste the productive time of knowledge workers.

## A platform for Managing Knowledge

The best solution is to deploy a **knowledge base platform** such as PHPKB to contain organizational knowledge, along with support and encouragement for sharing and retention of knowledge in your workplace. A knowledge base provides a centralized workspace where knowledge workers can not only share and collaborate with their colleagues but also store their knowledge ideas privately.

## Evoking People's Passions

The passion to go well beyond the extra mile drives people to create insanely great products and services. Management practices should accommodate or support knowledge work and help employees express the passion on their own. Create opportunities for knowledge workers so they can self-improve.

- Respect their professional status and identity
- Set a stretch goal and provide challenging work
- Minimize bureaucracy and the management burden

## Balanced Leadership

### Be a 'Leader,' not a 'Boss'

Traditional managers exercise no leadership at all but only position power. Knowledge workers don't want someone closely overseeing and supervising their work. Instead, they probably prefer managers to clear the way for them to work productively. Effective managerial leadership demands a delicate balance between sensitivity and authority, between the whole and the parts, between loose and tight leadership style, between functional expertise (depth of knowledge) and cross-functional excellence (width of knowledge), internal (creating value for the organization and employees) and external (creating value for investors, customers, and society).

To manage knowledge workers effectively in the modern knowledge-driven enterprise, modern managers should balance management with leadership and coaching to keep all these independent thinkers pointed in the same direction and working towards the same goal. Managing knowledge workers requires that managers themselves act as good followers, team players, leaders, and technologists.

## Recognize Expertise

In a knowledge incentive company, workers often know more than their managers. They are experts. To acknowledge them can be hard for any manager afraid of being seen as less important, less skilled, or less adept at creative problem-solving. But not trying is equivalent to constructing inauthentic positions where power and authority become more of a struggle than a negotiation.

## Working the Peer Network

As a leader, you must work the peer network of your knowledge workers actively. For example, if you have to manage a difficult employee, don't try to do it on your own. Reframing the problem from a boss-employee situation to a workgroup issue can be effective. Get their peers involved, since letting them down often has a much faster and stronger impact on the employee than letting the boss down.

## Motivation

Recognize the different needs and motivations of knowledge workers. This will make it much easier to find creative and effective ways to keep their productivity high. The motivation techniques for all knowledge workers are not alike, and as a

manager, you must discover what motivates them individually and what each one needs to be more creative. Some knowledge workers want acknowledgment, others might have monetary or social recognition desires.

## Acknowledge Knowledge Workers

To acknowledge knowledge workers is to involve them in dialogue, invite them into strategic decisions, and help them see that they are responsible for their own actions and the organization's development. Acknowledgment is appraisal and reward; it is confirming others as important, valued, and interesting.

## Social Recognition

For knowledge workers, recognition from peers or other experts may be a prime driver for growth. A knowledge manager's job is to facilitate opportunities for such processes, perhaps by methods such as allowing groups to form, organizing mentoring programs, peer guidance systems, or providing and maintaining arenas for organizational learning.

The knowledge manager should not aim for control, rather, knowledge managers should aim to build a system of mutual trust and learning, a system in which they themselves are a crucial part. The stepping stones for knowledge managers are context sensitivity, recognition, and respect in harmony with the use of appropriate tools and systems, clear expectations, and possibilities for growth. Knowledge workers need collectivity to learn, and managers are co-learners in that same collective.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Bogdanowicz, M.S., & Bailey, E.K. (2002). The value of knowledge and the value of the new knowledge worker: Generation X in the new economy. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 26, 125–129.

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