

## The difficulty of managing workers who know more than you

By Simon London

Published: August 31 2005 03:00 | Last updated: August 31 2005 03:00

It is 30 years since Peter Drucker hailed knowledge worker productivity as the great management challenge of the 20th century. By the 1960s we knew plenty about how to organise factories and logistics systems. But as the great sage of management observed, we understood next to nothing about how to get the most from doctors, lawyers, designers or marketing executives.

The century ended with the challenge still unmet. As Tom Davenport points out in *Thinking For A Living*, even today we lack "measures, methods and rules of thumb" for managing knowledge work.

This is not to say that the needs of knowledge workers have been ignored. Far from it. Knowledge management, one of the biggest management ideas of the 1990s, aimed to provide knowledge workers with the information they needed when they needed it. Similarly, investment in information technology ranging from simple e-mail to complex "customer relationship management" systems have been justified in the name of knowledge worker productivity.

But do the hours we spend answering e-mails make us more productive? How can this be measured? Is there a definition of "productive" that takes into account not only the quantity but also the quality of our output?

No wonder, remarks Davenport, that many employers resort to HSPALTA: hire smart people and leave them alone. The professor of management at Babson College, Massachusetts, is well placed to survey the ways in which organisations might get beyond HSPALTA.

In a career spent flitting between academia and consulting he has been involved in research projects studying everything from office architecture to information systems management.

Along the way, he wrote the first book on business process re-engineering (*Process Innovation*, 1992) and one of the best books on knowledge management (*Working Knowledge*, 1997, co-authored with Larry Prusak).

In his latest book he says that knowledge workers tend to share certain characteristics. Either highly educated or experienced, they hate being told what to do. They are reluctant to share knowledge. They usually have good reasons for working in the ways they do, although these are likely to become apparent only after detailed observation.

In sum, they are a management consultant's worst nightmare. This explains why bone-headed attempts to re-engineer knowledge work always end in failure. It also explains why knowledge management systems, customer relationship management systems and other technology-driven "tools" are often ignored.

This is not to argue that knowledge workers cannot be managed, just that managers need to be much more egalitarian and participative than is the norm in industrial settings. Hard as it may be, managers must accept that their notional subordinates probably know more than they do.

*Thinking For A Living* then looks at some of the factors known to have an impact on the productivity of knowledge workers, including the way their work is organised, the information technology systems they use and their social networks.

One of Davenport's virtues as a management writer is a refusal to over-claim or boil down complex topics into simplistic formulas. For example, he asks whether process improvement techniques from manufacturing, such as Total Quality Management and Six Sigma, can be applied to knowledge work. His answer is that with certain types of knowledge work, such as call centres, it can help.

But he knows from experience that independent-minded professionals will resist vigorously the idea that their jobs can be reduced to a series of "process steps".

There is the rub: knowledge work comes in many different varieties. Call centre operators are knowledge workers. So too are management consultants, software engineers and teachers. What works in one context may backfire terribly in another.

Davenport's willingness to address the complexity of the topic makes this book worth reading. It also helps explain why such an erudite author has never achieved the superstar status of many lesser writers. Thankfully, in business book publishing, as in software engineering or brain surgery, quality still counts for something.