

# Drucker's Dictums

---

## Knowledge Work, Workers & Working

Fred Nickols

11/3/2016

### **Abstract**

No one paid more attention to the shift to knowledge work or the rise of the knowledge worker than the late Peter F. Drucker (1909-2005). Starting in 1959, with *Landmarks for Tomorrow*, and continuing to his death in 2005, Drucker steadfastly chronicled and commented about the challenge of making knowledge work productive and the knowledge worker achieving. This paper presents a collection of what I view as some of his more important comments (i.e., "dictums") taken from the two books in which he commented at great length on that challenge: *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969) and *Management* (1973). His challenge, by the way, is still with us.

# Drucker's Dictums: Knowledge Work, Workers & Working

## ***Context***

This piece presents a collection of some of the passages I underlined in my copies of two of Peter Drucker's books because I thought they were particularly important. After reviewing them I still think that is the case. The two books are *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969) and *Management* (1973). I think of those underlined passages as "Drucker's Dictums."

In 1969, in *The Age of Discontinuity*, Drucker focused at length on the shift to a knowledge economy and knowledge work. He also began his detailed and decades-long chronicling of and commentary about the rise of the knowledge worker. In it, he posed the following challenge:

To make knowledge work productive will be the great management task of this century, just as to make manual work productive was the great management task of the last century (p.290).

Later, in his monumental tome, *Management*, Drucker examined knowledge work and knowledge workers at great length and went into great detail regarding what it would take to meet the challenge he had presented earlier. These two books are full of informative insights into the nature of knowledge work and what it will take to make it productive – and to make the knowledge worker achieving.

The material presented here goes back some 40 plus years. Nevertheless, I do not think what Drucker had to say is outdated. Indeed, perhaps the age of Drucker's dictums illustrates perfectly something George Santayana said; namely, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Let's hope that looking back at what Drucker had to say will refresh our memories and prevent us from repeating past mistakes. His "dictums" are presented in the next two sections.

## ***The Age of Discontinuity (1969)***

"Knowledge" rather than "science" has become the foundation of the modern economy (p.265).

"Knowledge" as normally considered by the "intellectual" is something very different from "knowledge" in the context of "knowledge economy" or "knowledge work." For the intellectual, knowledge is what is in a book. But as long as it is in the book, it is only "information" if not mere "data." Only when a man applies the information to doing something does it become knowledge (p.269).

Though the knowledge worker is not a "laborer," and certainly not a "proletarian," he is still an "employee." He is not a "subordinate" in the sense that he can be told what to do; he is paid, on the contrary, for applying his knowledge, exercising his judgment, and taking responsible leadership. Yet he has a "boss" – in fact, he needs to have a boss to be productive. And the boss is usually not a member of the same discipline but a "manager" whose special competence is to plan, organize, integrate and measure the work of knowledge people regardless of their discipline or area of specialization (p.276).

We also do not know how to manage the knowledge worker so that he wants to contribute and perform. But we do know that he must be managed quite differently from the way we manage the manual worker. Motivation for knowledge work must come from within the worker himself (p.288).

# Drucker's Dictums: Knowledge Work, Workers & Working

## ***Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices (1973)***

The knowledge worker, except on the very lowest levels of knowledge work, is not productive under the spur of fear; only self-motivation and self-direction can make him productive (p.176).

No one but the knowledge worker himself can come to grips with the question of what in work, job performance, social status and pride constitutes the personal satisfaction that makes a knowledge worker feel that he contributes, that he performs, that he serves his values, and that he fulfills himself (p.177).

The shift in the structure and character of work has created a demand that work produce more than purely economic benefits. To make a living is no longer enough. Work also has to make a life (p.179).

The most important thing we know is that work and working are fundamentally different phenomena (pp. 181-182).

As with every phenomenon of the objective universe, the first step toward understanding work is to *analyze it*. This, as Taylor realized a century ago, means identifying the basic operations, analyzing each of them, and arranging them in logical, balanced, and rational sequence (p.182).

But then – and Taylor did not realize this – work has to be synthesized again. It has to be put together into a process (p.182).

Finally, work, precisely because it is a process rather than an individual operation, needs a built-in control. It needs a feedback mechanism which both senses unexpected deviations and with them the need to change the process, and maintains the process at the level needed to obtain the desired results (p.183).

The output of the knowledge worker always becomes somebody else's input. It is, therefore, not self-evident in knowledge work, as it is in making a pair of shoes, whether the work has results or not. This can be seen only by projecting backward from the needed end results (p.183).

Knowledge work, therefore, needs far better design, precisely because it cannot be designed *for* the worker. It can be designed only *by* the worker (p.183).

To be productive the individual has to have control, to a substantial extent, over the speed, rhythm, and attention spans with which he is working . . . (p.184).

While *work* is, therefore, best laid out as uniform, *working* is best organized with a considerable degree of diversity. (p.184)

The first thing to know is that controlling the work process means control of the work, and not control of the worker (pp. 217-218).

To enable the worker to achieve, he must therefore first be able to take responsibility for his job (p.267).

# Drucker's Dictums: Knowledge Work, Workers & Working

The second prerequisite for worker responsibility is feedback information on his own performance. Responsibility requires self-control. That in turn requires continuous information on performance against standards (p.268).

The third requirement for achievement in work and for a responsible worker is continuous learning (p.269).

Finally, there is the knowledge worker, and especially the advanced knowledge worker. He has to be a "knowledge professional" . . . This means that no one can motivate him. He has to motivate himself. No one can direct him. Above all, no one can supervise him. He is the guardian of his own standards, of his own performance, of his own performance, and of his own objectives. He can be productive only if he is responsible for his own job (p.279).

## Conclusion

I saved the following comment by Drucker for last because I think it is particularly applicable to the current world of work, workers, working and management. In *Management*, Drucker wrote:

[The] manager has to manage now. He has to find solutions – or at least accommodations – which will enable him to make work productive and the worker achieving. He has to understand what the demands are. He cannot expect to succeed by continuing the practices of the last two hundred years. He will have to develop new approaches, new principles, and new methods – and fast (pp. 196-197).

It is now more than 40 years since Drucker published *Management* and although it can be argued that we have since made considerable progress it can also be argued that we are far from having solved the problem of making knowledge work productive and the knowledge worker achieving. As Tom Davenport wrote as recently as 2005 in *Thinking for a Living*, "Yet despite the importance of knowledge workers to the economic success of countries, companies, and other groups, they haven't received sufficient attention (p.8)." Indeed, there is at least some evidence that many managers could care less about work, workers and working. Their interests lie elsewhere and many of them rely still on a carrot-and-stick approach. But as Drucker said of that approach in *Management*, "The stick is no longer available to the manager, and the carrot is today becoming less and less of an incentive" (p.235). That, too, can be argued. While it is true that the typical performance appraisal system doesn't provide the boss with much in the way of "carrots," it does offer a powerful "stick;" careers can be damaged or destroyed by a negative appraisal. Carrot-and-stick management is alive, if not well.

Where all this leaves us, then, is where we are today – in a workplace filled with knowledge workers, or what I prefer to call "self-managed employees (SMEs)," and we still know precious little about how to deal with them. One thing we do know is that *we* can't manage *them*; they have to manage themselves and it is the job of management – and our job as professionals concerned with performance in the workplace – to find ways of equipping SMEs to manage their own performance and of then supporting them in doing it.

# Drucker's Dictums: Knowledge Work, Workers & Working

Finally, to elucidate what should by now be obvious, we have much to learn from studying and analyzing the ways in which we manage our own performance. After all, we too are self-managed, whether as consultants, independent contractors or as employees. We are, to use the late William T. Powers' term, "living control systems" and Powers' control theory view of human behavior is an excellent starting point. It provides a solid foundation for examining how we manage (i.e., control) our own performance. So ask yourself this question: How is it that *I* manage or control my own behavior and performance and what can *I* do to improve upon that? I'll wager your answers will prove enlightening and useful.

## References

1. Davenport, T.H. (2005). *Thinking for a Living*. Harvard Business School Press: Cambridge
2. Drucker, P.F. (1969), *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society*. Harper & Row: New York
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (1973), *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. Harper & Row: New York
4. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems*. Control Systems Group, Inc.: Gravel Switch

## About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer and a consultant, and the managing partner of [Dis-tance Consulting LLC](#). He served 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. While in the Navy, he served as a technician, a trainer and an internal organization development (OD) consultant. In the private sector, he worked in several small consulting firms and held two executive-level positions with client firms. A longtime member of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), he writes the Knowledge Workers column for ISPI's *PerformanceXpress*. His web site contains more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. It is also home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers Tool Room](#).