

# Knowledge Worker

## Taking Aim at Management Practices

(September 2015)

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One of the major issues in today's world of work is often referred to under the label "engagement" which refers to a supposed characteristic or quality of those employees who go the extra mile, who contribute more of their discretionary effort. We are told engaged employees work harder and smarter. Most important, and usually unmentioned, they exercise a great deal of discretion. To use Peter Drucker's term they are "knowledge workers;" they do work that requires them to configure their responses to the situation at hand instead of simply carrying out prefigured routines. They exercise discretion in what they do, how they do it, how often, how hard and, ultimately, to what ends.

When it comes to knowledge work, the locus of control over working activities has shifted from management to the worker, creating what I have come to call "The Control Problem." This is perhaps the major and typically unstated reason so much attention and energy is devoted to efforts aimed at engaging employees.

As is the case with many "hot" issues, employee engagement has spawned numerous endeavors and enterprises promising to increase or improve the level of employee engagement, to deliver engaged employees. As is the case with many such endeavors, they often fail to deliver. They fail because they are wide of the mark; they aim at the wrong thing. In this case they aim at a supposed, imagined and at best inferred quality or characteristic of employees. Management should be aiming at its own practices. Any lack of employee engagement owes to management's practices, not the employees.

Consider the table below. It contrasts the old, industrial era world of work with the new world of work. Each and every item listed is rife with implications for management practices.

### Factors Related to the Control Problem

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Industrial Era</b>	<b>Modern Times</b>
<i>Input Variability</i>	Low	High
<i>Process Variability</i>	Low	High
<i>Output Variability</i>	Low	High
<i>Workflow</i>	Linear	Non-Linear
<i>Control Principle</i>	Compliance	Commitment
<i>Focus of Controls</i>	Actions	Outcomes
<i>Locus of Control</i>	Supervisor	Worker
<i>Basis of Authority</i>	Position	Knowledge
<i>Management Style</i>	Directive	Collaborative
<i>Management Philosophy</i>	Command & Control	Communication & Collaboration
<i>Basic Management Task</i>	Supervising	Supporting
<i>Basis of Work</i>	Materials	Information

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<b>Factor</b>	<b>Industrial Era</b>	<b>Modern Times</b>
<i>Locus of Interactions</i>	People > Materials	People <> People
<i>Results &amp; Feedback</i>	Direct & Immediate	Indirect & Delayed
<i>Behaviors of Interest</i>	Overt, Physical	Covert, Verbal
<i>Visibility of Working</i>	High	Low
<i>Working Activities</i>	Prefigured	Configured
<i>Working Conditions</i>	Highly Standardized	Highly Variable
<i>Standards</i>	Fixed, External	Variable, Internal
<i>Worker's Role</i>	Instrument	Agent
<i>Markets Served</i>	Mass	Niches
<i>Nature of Demand</i>	Concentrated	Dispersed
<i>Nature of the Economy</i>	Local/National	International/Global
<i>Economic Leverage</i>	Deploying Capital	Employing Knowledge
<i>Knowledge</i>	Concentrated	Distributed
<i>Competitive Edge</i>	Cost	Cost, Quality, Speed
<i>Rate of Change</i>	Low	High
<i>Degree of Regulation</i>	High	Low
<i>Skill Level</i>	Low	High
<i>Judgment Required</i>	Low	High
<i>Risk Tolerance</i>	Low	High
<i>Worker Discretion</i>	Low	High
<i>Worker Engagement</i>	Low	High
<i>Worker Commitment</i>	Low	High

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When I first compiled the table above I sent it off to Peter Drucker for comment. He responded in a handwritten note saying, "You are on exactly the right track" and he asked that I keep him informed. Sadly, he passed away before I could honor his request.

Current management practices have their roots in the industrial era, when work and working were of a very different nature. Even a cursory review and comparison of the items in the Industrial Era and Modern Times columns in the table above suggests a need for new and different management practices (e.g., providing support instead of supervision, obtaining commitment instead of ensuring compliance, practices based on communication and collaboration instead of command and control, and viewing

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workers as autonomous agents instead of obedient instrument). There are, then, gaps in management practices and it is these gaps that account for any lack of employee engagement. Getting employees to be more engaged can be achieved only by closing those gaps and it will take new management practices to close those gaps. To again borrow from Peter Drucker, we must set our sights on a new practice of management, one more suited to modern times.

### About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).