# Knowledge Worker
Three Worlds of Work and Six Kinds of Work
(May 2020)

The March 2017 Knowledge Worker column was titled "We Live in Two Different Worlds." It focused on the differences between prefigured and configured work routines, and the distinctions between materials-based or physical work and information-based or mental work.

That column elicited a string of comments and, over time, I have modified my thinking. This month's column begins with the notion that there are *three* worlds of work, not two as I originally asserted (see the diagram below).

The Three Worlds of Work
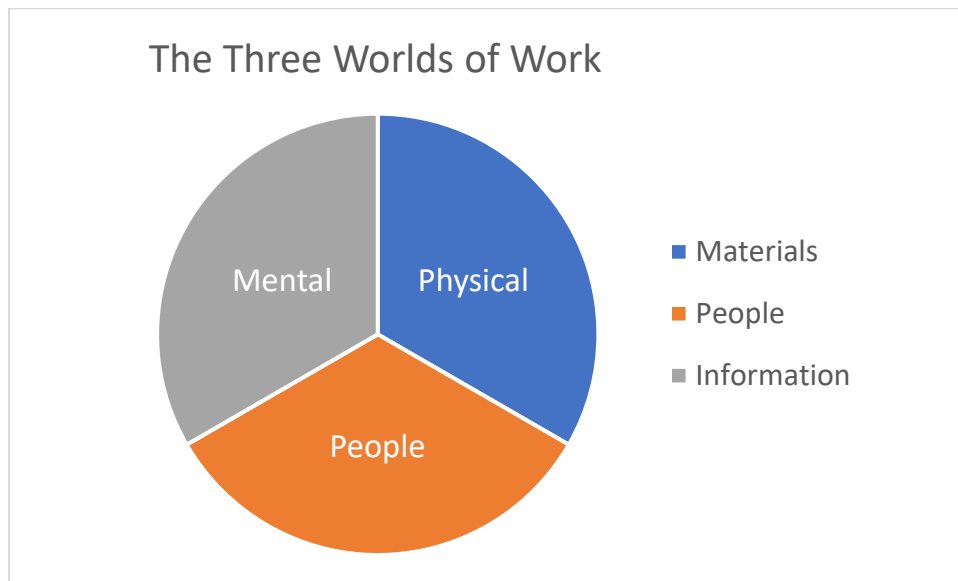
The key to the pie chart ties to the locus of interactions while working. People whose interactions are primarily with materials (e.g., laying bricks, building houses, and digging ditches) are doing what I call "Physical Work". People whose interactions are primarily with information (e.g., processing insurance claims or loan applications, handling accounts payable and accounts receivable, and troubleshooting electronic equipment) are doing what I call "Mental Work". The third category consists of people doing what I call "People Work." Their interactions are primarily with other people. This category includes supervisors, interviewers, coaches, and salespeople.

However, it should be noted that the work of most people is some mix of all three kinds of interactions. As was pointed out to me by someone who read the 2017 column, even a "wrench turner" has to use and apply knowledge and information. Ditto for a technician repairing a TV set. Similarly, loan officers at banks have frequent interactions with people and with information. So do claims examiners. And most of us fill out expense vouchers from time to time. In the end, the question of which category applies to a given person is a question of which kind of interaction with what dominates that person's work and which kind adds the most value.

A key consideration ties to the distinction between work that involves prefigured routines and work that requires configured responses to the circumstances at hand. Those are two different worlds of work,

whether the work is information-based, materials-based or situated in interactions between and among people. The interplay of these two sets of factors yields a table that suggests six basic kinds of work (see below). The three worlds of work have two kinds of work, for a total of six kinds of work.

Six Kinds of Work		
Locus of Interactions	Prefigured Routines	Configured Responses
Materials (Physical)	Tire Rotation	Collision Repair
Information (Mental)	Claims Resolution	Fraud Investigation
People (People)	Job Interview	Police Interrogation

It seems likely that all jobs consist of a mix of these six kinds of work, although any given job might be focused on one or two of them. It therefore becomes of more than passing interest to identify the mix, to determine how much of each kind of work required by a given job, to determine the value added by each kind, and to establish the priorities of each kind.

In light of the table above, an interesting exercise would be to examine existing job descriptions with the aim of identifying how many of the six kinds of work are reflected in the job description. An accompanying exercise would be to interview job incumbents after explaining to them the six kinds of work and see how many different kinds they can identify that are part of their job, whether or not they are reflected in the job description.

Consider, for example, the TV technician mentioned earlier. He works in the back room of a TV repair shop. His work entails troubleshooting and fixing TVs. He uses test equipment and various tools (e.g., screwdrivers, pliers, wire cutters, soldering iron, etc.). Occasionally, he refers to a manual or trouble-shooting guide. He has occasional interactions with his boss but almost never with customers. He is the only technician in the shop. His work is a mix of materials-based and information-based. By far, the more important of the two is the information-based work associated with troubleshooting TV sets. His work is also a mix of prefigured and configured responses. Many of the tests he runs are more or less canned but which ones to run is something he has to figure out.

A final point. The addition of "people work" signals that more attention needs to be placed on what some call "people skills." Training departments typically focus on the skills associated with doing physical, ma-terials-based work or mental, information-based work. Training in people skills seems not to get the same kind of attention and are often referred to as "soft skills." Perhaps performance improvement profes-sionals should also pay more attention to "people work."

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a 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 *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at Distance Consulting LLC. His web site is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking here.