HELPING YOUR KNOWLEDGE
WORKERS TO HELP THEMSELVES

It's the thought that counts

Knowledge work is an understood idea and phenomena, but what about the nitty-gritty of actually making it effective? **Julian Birkinshaw** and **Jordan Cohen** make knowledge work real

Over the past 60 years knowledge workers (who use their brains, rather than their hands, to transform inputs into outputs) have come to dominate the business landscape. While many knowledge workers are self-employed, the majority work in large corporations where their responsibilities include not only individual and client-facing work, but also managing subordinates, coordinating with peers and collaborating with superiors.

Knowledge workers present a real challenge to their managers. The work they do is difficult to observe, the quality of their output is frequently subjective, and much of their value is provided through their own discretion. If a manager thinks that a knowledge worker wasn't smart or creative enough on a project, or was spending his or her time inefficiently and on the wrong activities, there is no obvious way to quantify the deficiency or to establish clear performance benchmarks. It is challenging to diagnose the problem, let alone implement a solution. ›

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, 'Make Time for the Work that Matters', we looked at ways that knowledge workers could become more effective themselves, by delegating and outsourcing their low value-added work and focusing on more strategic tasks.

For our sample of 45 knowledge workers, 70 per cent of their time was spent at their desk or sitting in meetings with colleagues in other parts of the organisation. Only 12 per cent of their time was spent on externally-facing activities, 10 per cent was spent "managing down" (coaching and supporting direct reports) and 7 per cent was spent "managing up" (with their boss). When asked how valuable these various activities were, on average these knowledge workers estimated that 41 per cent of their time was going into activities that offer little personal satisfaction and could be handled competently by others.

We designed a simple intervention to help knowledge workers realign their efforts around more value-added work. They looked forward in their diary to identify low value-added activities that could be stopped (we divided them into quick kills, off-load opportunities and long-term redesign), then they made a verbal commitment to us about what activities they would stop doing and what higher value-added activities they would start doing instead.

Fifteen knowledge workers took part in this intervention, and on average they were able to reduce their desk work by six hours per week and meetings by two hours per week. This time was then filled with value-added tasks such as coaching and reflecting on strategic matters.

There are, in other words, lots of things individual knowledge workers can do to help themselves – to take charge of their own busy schedules and to become more effective at prioritising their high value-added work. But, of course, this is only one side of the story. In this article, we look at the other side – how senior executives can put in place initiatives at the firm level to help their knowledge workers to help themselves.

Make judicious interventions

Here is the challenge you face as a senior executive: You cannot manage your knowledge workers in the traditional and intrusive way you might have done with manual workers, because they own the means of production (their brains). So large scale re-engineering programmes, productivity drives and changes to the incentive system are unlikely to work; they can easily be resisted, ignored or gamed. But just letting your knowledge workers figure things out for themselves isn't a good model either – it is an abrogation of your responsibilities and it allows people to shirk and lose focus.

You need to find the middle ground – judicious interventions that allow knowledge workers to help themselves. Our research and consulting work over the years has suggested there are three broad approaches you can try, each with its own pros and cons.

Enact a sharp "decree" to force a specific change in behaviour

In 2011, Thierry Andretta, then CEO of French fashion company, Lanvin, announced an initiative called "no email Wednesdays" because he felt people had stopped actually talking to each other. Atomic Object, a software company in Michigan, put in place a standing-only rule in meetings, to keep them focused and short. Marissa Meyer, Yahoo's CEO, recently announced a no working at home rule. Such decrees are risky. By forcing people out of their daily routine, you are bound to upset a few of them: so you need to be able to enforce the decree effectively, you need to have a good reason to do it and you need a thick skin. You should also position your decree as temporary – as a way of forcing a change in behaviour for a few months or a year so that people can subsequently figure out for themselves if this new way of working is sensible.

Build smart support systems

This is a longer-term approach. It takes some time to work through but its benefits are likely to be felt for many years. And it can involve building something new, or taking something else away.

In terms of building something new, consider the notion of micro-outsourcing. This is where a knowledge worker farms out specific tasks to a low-cost provider, so she can focus on more value-added work. One of us (Jordan) had personal responsibility for setting up such a service in Pfizer – it became known as PfizerWorks, and its aim was simply to help employees be more effective in their jobs. Now, whenever a PfizerWorks user decides she needs support she simply pushes a button, describes her need in a pop-up window and presses send. Users then report time and money saved after each task is completed. Possibly the biggest impact is the ease in which an employee can summon support and the increased motivation that results in getting back to doing what is interesting and impactful work.

In terms of taking something away, there are many management processes in large firms that are ripe for simplification. For example, a few years ago the top executive team at UBS Wealth Management realised that the biggest constraint on their future growth was their cumbersome and conservative budgeting process. By eliminating this top-down process, and pushing accountability for target-setting down to the individual desk-heads around the world, they enabled the business to grow more effectively, and they got their knowledge workers – their client advisors – to take more responsibility than they had before. At a more micro-level, we saw a team at pharmaceutical company Roche recently experiment with a much simpler expense-claim processing

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Knowledge is power
Managing knowledge
workers requires flexibility
and lateral thinking

system based around peer review rather than oversight, and again it was a useful way of getting rid of tedious and non-value-added activities.

Lead by example

A third approach is to follow Gandhi's dictum: be the change you wish to see in the world. By pushing for significant changes in the balance of responsibility between your knowledge workers and the people who are nominally above them in the corporate hierarchy, you can help the knowledge workers to become more effective in their work. Consider the case of Ross Smith, Director of Testing for Microsoft Lync – the Audio Video Conferencing and Instant Messaging service, formerly known as Microsoft Office Communicator. Since taking the job four years ago, he has sought ways of pushing greater responsibility on to his 80-person division of software engineers. When Microsoft Lync 2010 was released, he was asked to reorganise his division so

> **"Decrees are a forceful way of pushing people out of their comfort zones"**

that the testing of the next generation product could begin. Rather than decide everything himself, he decided to let the reorg happen in a bottom-up way. He explained that individual contributors would select which of four teams they would like to be in. These 80 or so people became free agents looking for a position that was best for them. The team leaders could not offer more money, but they could offer employees opportunities to develop their careers, new technologies to work on and new colleagues to work with.

The reorg – quickly dubbed a "WeOrg" – took longer than anticipated, as people really wanted to do the research to find the right fit and to interview their prospective bosses. There was some scepticism about whether it would work, but Smith had already built a sufficiently strong culture of trust for his people to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was also able to promise there would be no staff cuts because of the changes. The outcome was that 95 per cent of

the team "liked" or "somewhat liked" the new method. But more broadly, the result was that Smith's 80-person team felt a much greater responsibility than usual for structuring their work in a way that was most effective for them and their colleagues.

These three approaches are very different, but they all seek to engender changes in behaviour among your knowledge workers. Decrees are a forceful way of pushing people out of their comfort zones, so that they (hopefully) see the benefits of the new approach. Smarter support systems are intended to debureaucratise work, to help people prioritise more value-added work. Leading by example is about getting people to take responsibility for their own effectiveness. ■

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