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Who retain as knowledge workers?

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Abstract

Knowledge workers, through the handling and deployment of knowledge, are widely solicited by organizations that seek to retain them in the age of the immaterial for fear of a hemorrhage of the portfolio of key competencies. Nevertheless, proponents of human capital theory call for a distinction between knowledge workers who carry specific human capital and those who carry general human capital by insisting on retaining the latter.

Keywords: Knowledge workers, knowledge work, organizational commitment of knowledge workers, specific human capital, general human capital.

Introduction

The age of the intangible value's intangible resources and their creators who participate in creating competitive advantage, (Drucker, 1999). Efforts are being made by organizations to engage knowledge workers and maintain a renewed knowledge potential (Barney, 1986:1991; Grant, 1991; Winter, 1987; Nonaka, 1995 and Drucker, 1999). The issue of organizational commitment remains relevant for a population such as knowledge workers despite job insecurity (Meyer et al, 2002).

The profile of the knowledge worker is not well explored in the specialized literature and its perimeter is not well defined either in the work code or in the internal regulations of many organizations. This paper then attempts to describe this profile as well as the nature of the work that it performs while discussing the human capital approach and demonstrating that the organizational commitment of general human capital is more effective than the organizational commitment of specific human capital and then answer our research problematic which is expressed by the following question: "Which knowledge workers to keep? The works of Chaminade (2003), Griffeth Hom (2001) and Vandenberghe, (2004: 2005) are essential insofar as they demonstrate that organizational commitment is a cornerstone of any policy aimed at retaining talented personnel. Moreover, the work of Galunic and Anderson (2000), Lepak and Snell (1999) call on organizations to retain general human capital since it is a source of disruptive innovation and easily transferable from one organization to another. Specific human capital is difficult to transfer from one organization to another or from one context. A thesis subject to theoretical and practical debate.

I- Knowledge workers: What profile?

It is often very difficult to accurately define the profile of a knowledge worker due to a lack of theoretical and practical basis, (Scarborough, 1999). The virtual absence of a legal status leaves ambiguity as to the distinction between a knowledge worker and a non-knowledge worker, (Ooms, 2007). The labor code and the collective agreement also remain uneasy about this status and do not presume to define this profile. Yet, this human capital constitutes "the most valuable asset of the 21st century institution, whether market or non-market" according to Drucker (1977) who first defined the profile of a knowledge worker as "A high level employee who applies theoretical and analytical knowledge acquired through formal education, to developing new products or services. Not belonging to a specific professional category, the knowledge worker, aware of his or her market value, is in search of better working conditions conducive to the use of his or her knowledge and even aspires to pursue a

form of personal entrepreneurship.

We outline the main works that aim to define the profile of the knowledge worker. Drucker (1996) describes him as an intelligent worker who manipulates electronic signals. Sveiby (2000) considers him as an expert or a qualified specialist who uses his creativity to solve complex problems. Quinn et al (1992) considers him as an intellectual worker who manages to solve complex problems in complex situations by using his knowledge at the same time generating specialized knowledge and elaborating new combinations between different resources. He then possesses a rare skill. For Alter (1993), knowledge workers constitute a capital of innovators who are a source of competitive advantage. They are even "the hard core of each organization, without which the organization loses part of itself; they are the professionals of the first leaf of the cloverleaf" according to Handy (1986). These knowledge workers have a portfolio of specific and renewed skills and hold the organization's own knowledge (Handy, 1986; Argyris, 1998 ; Bouchez, 2006).

Three categories of knowledge workers are identified by Ooms (2007), namely the innovator or inventor, the improver and the specialist. The innovator develops new products and services or new ideas in a laboratory or workplace. The improver improves work processes, services and products. The specialist exploits specific knowledge in a particular field, disseminates it and acts as a subcontractor for the innovator and the improver. However, it remains difficult to differentiate between the three types and overlaps are common according to Kahia (2002) and there is no clearly established professional identity and does not constitute a homogeneous professional group according to Scarbrough (1999) who calls for the concept of the knowledge worker to be identified by the work he or she performs.

II- Knowledge work: What specificities?

The definition of the profile of the knowledge worker is not at all easy. Drucker (1996) considers it as "the handling and deployment of theoretical and analytical knowledge that comes from formal education to develop new products and services". It is "the process of acquiring, generating, storing and applying knowledge" according to Nonaka (1995), Rugles (1998), Davenport et al (1996). It is "the creation, application or dissemination of knowledge throughout the organization" according to Kelloway and Barling (2000). Salim (2001) defines it below according to seven variables:

-Skills: the need for specific skills by knowledge area and general peripheral knowledge.

-The unit of work: organization of work in the form of networks, work teams or project groups.

The purpose of the work: of a solving nature using analytical problem-solving skills and a permanent search for customer satisfaction.

-Skill obsolescence: unlike traditional work that wears out gradually, the skills of the knowledge worker become obsolete quickly.

-Performance measurement: Performance is measured in terms of process efficiency and creative behavior that supports the organization's competitiveness.

-Worker loyalty: Loyalty to several constituents of the organization such as the knowledge worker network, the company, the career.

-Impact on the success of the organization: Through the

actions they undertake, knowledge workers succeed in achieving the strategic objectives of the company, which sees itself as performing well and moving towards excellence.

Knowledge work appears in the specialized literature as research, new product design, advertising activities, teaching, legal activities, consulting, accounting and auditing, medicine, programming, engineering, biotechnology, surgery, piloting, operations in a nuclear power plant, (Bender and Fish, 2000; Raymond, 1997; Quinn et al, 1992).

Not belonging to a well-defined category, knowledge work is unstructured, not reduced to a formal knowledge management process, not contingent to the vagaries of the environment, flexible, cognitive, reasoned, non-linear, rather discretionary, informational in order to manage complex situations and satisfy the different needs of the company's stakeholders and partners.

Finally, holding an expertise, a specialization, a resolutive capacity or strategic knowledge deployed throughout the value chain and creating value could define the work of knowledge workers, which should then be the subject of a specific management and an effective retention policy by risk of seeing a hemorrhage of key skills of the organization, (Kahia, 2012).

III- Organizational commitment of knowledge workers: Who to retain?

The interest of theorists and practitioners in organizational commitment is justified by the interest in the retention of talent, (Chaminade, 2003; Griffith Hom, 2001; Vandenberghe (2004: 2005)). Before investing in human capital, talent had to be classified. According to the proponents of the human capital theory, it was necessary to distinguish between specific human capital and general human capital, (Galunic and Anderson, 2000; Lepak and Snell, 1999).

The investment in specific human capital is non-transferable, linked to specific skills and is related to a know-how linked to a process developed by the company (Galunic and Anderson, 2000; Lepak and Snell, 1999).

The investment in general human capital is transferable in nature from one company to another, is linked to the individual as a general training that can be valued in another company and was evaluated by the diploma and professional experience on the labour market (Galunic and Anderson, 2000; Lepak and Snell, 1999).

How human capital is managed forms the basis of the organization's competitive advantage (Quinn, 1992; Régnier, 1995; Drucker, 1998; Pfeffer, 1998; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Hamel and Prahalad, 1990). The distinction between the two types of human capital is a cornerstone for any policy focused on retaining knowledge workers. It is then essential to consider who to retain from this profile since there are good theoretical reasons to believe that the development of organizational commitment differs according to the type of human capital. HR practices have to be in line with each type of human capital to be retained, whether it is specific or general. For example, the company is not obliged to increase the remuneration of a knowledge worker who has accumulated specific human capital, insofar as it is the only one able to exploit his or her skills. On the other hand, it is obliged to pay him or her a salary higher than the market salary when he or she possesses generic

skills and knowledge (Becker, 1960; Madsen et al, 2003;

Galunic and Anderson, 2000).

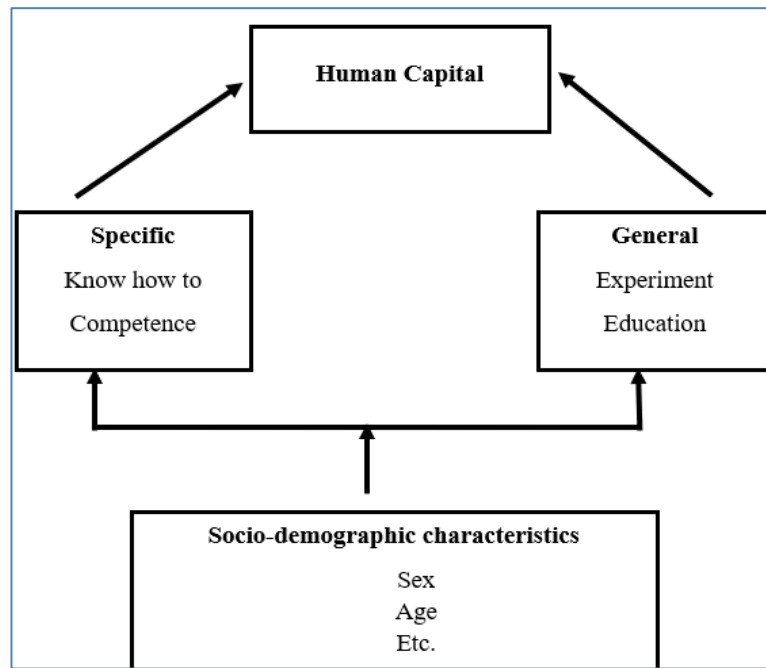


Fig. 1: Human Capital Source: Translated from Madsen et al (2003).

Conclusion

The problem of retaining knowledge workers is a current one despite the context of precariousness and the advent of Generation Z who is different from generation X and Y (Fray et al, 2015). The rather typical and centered profile of knowledge workers has required some clarification, but without being able to define it. Not belonging to a well-defined professional status, nor to a well-determined socio-professional category, the knowledge worker as well as knowledge work are associated with the handling, deployment and renewal of human skills and organizational knowledge in light of the vagaries of the external environment that are imposed, at the pace of a facilitating leadership and effective management, (Kahia, 2012). The imperative to distinguish between specific and general human capital makes their management more effective, efficient and relevant. The best HRM practices dedicated to the management of human capital as a source of competitive advantage are the "High Commitment Management" system (Purcell, 1999), "mobilizing and innovative HRM practices" (Rondeau and Lemelin, 1991), "involving HRM practices" (Lawler, 1992), and "organizational empowerment" practices (Lawler, 1992).

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