

Worlds of Work

Summary of the New Worlds of Work Research Report 2007

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May 1, 2008

1 Summary and Conclusions

This report presents and discusses the results of our research on knowledge work in three case organizations, Microsoft Netherlands, De Unie and Rabobank. At the start of this research Microsoft and Rabobank initiated new work concepts and they will move to another building. De Unie started to introduce new work concepts in 2003.

The report starts with pointing at the global changes that influence the nature of knowledge work. Knowledge work is no longer reserved to a small elite of experts but has diffused to all ranks in modern organizations. New dimensions of work have emerged in recent years. While the old dimension are strongly related to the nature of employee's tasks and motivation (the Hackman and Oldham model) the new work dimensions are more associated with relational and technological aspects of knowledge work. The most important new work dimensions are usage of new technology, mobility, transparency, collaboration within teams, empowerment, trust, and work-life balance.

The survey instrument integrates the old and new work dimensions. The survey results show that the three case organizations score moderate-high (3 – 5) on almost all old and new work dimensions. It means that new work dimensions are relevant to these organizations. The most important exceptions are workplace mobility and team distribution. De Unie and Rabobank scored significantly lower on these dimensions compared to Microsoft. These differences can mainly explain the differences in the business context [industry] in which the three organizations participate. The three case organizations gave relatively low scores on the workplace dimensions. This is an interesting finding as Microsoft and Rabobank are currently implementing new workplace strategies, while De Unie already has implemented new work concepts.

Summarizing the major findings across cases:

- The tasks the employees work on are quite interdependent, transparent, moderate complex, highly varied, and a large variety of skills are needed to accomplish these tasks.
- The employees are strongly intrinsically and rather strong extrinsically motivated.
- They feel strongly empowered
- They further appreciate the relationships with their colleagues and their superiors.
- They are quite prepared to change
- They use technology for different purposes and have a very positive attitude towards using new technology
- They are not very enthusiastic to workplace innovations

Next to this work dimension analysis we investigated how employee performances (employee satisfaction, productivity, flexibility, and innovativeness) correlated different aspects of work. What follows is a summary of our study results.

Employee Satisfaction

Employee satisfaction is mainly influenced by the new work dimension, these are empowerment, trust in management, and satisfaction workplace. It is interesting to observe that no correlation was found with the well-known old work dimension task characteristics.

Productivity

Productivity appears to be a particularly complex factor to measure, which may be explained by its perceived correlation with many different work aspects. Again, empowerment is positively influencing productivity. Task interdependency and transparency negatively influence productivity. In the case of Microsoft and Rabobank extrinsic motivation contributes to productivity.

Flexibility

Job flexibility correlates strongly with new work dimensions, workplace mobility and with empowerment. Collaboration within the organization has a negative influence of job flexibility.

Innovativeness

Innovativeness is closely associated with technology usage, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, willingness to change, and career encouragement. No correlations were found for the old work dimension task characteristics. New workplace factors have a negative impact on innovativeness.

On the basis of these general findings we can conclude that new work dimensions, which were the focus of our study, explain most of the variance in employee performances.

The case studies described the context of our survey findings and analyses the intricate processes of change with respect to the implementation of new work concepts.

2 Implications

2.1 Theoretical implications

Work has been studied for decades. However there is still no common template that can be applied to all types of work. Moreover the nature of work has been changing dramatically over the years. Research templates need adapt to these changes. Management scholars appear to show little interest in researching the phenomenon of work. Some researchers (Shina and Van de Ven, 2005; Barley and Kunda, 2001) critiqued this lack of interest and encourage management and organizational scholars to return to the frontier of organization science: work design. Through the initial steps taken in this study we heed their 'call'.

In this study we focused on knowledge work. During our literature review we found that there was no research framework that addressed the old and new dimensions of (knowledge) work in a comprehensive way. We found support for combining old and new dimensions of work as the employees performances were explained by old *and* new concepts of work.

2.2 Managerial implications

The aim of the research was not to provide the management of the three case organizations with straightforward advice for interventions or with management tools to implement new work concepts in their organizations. Rather our aim was to reflect on

their actions and to provide them with information that might serve as a mirror to their practice. Moreover the results served as boundary objects between the academic and the business world. The research results were not always unambiguous and needed interpretations by the researchers and those responsible for introducing new world concepts. We hope that this dialogue shall contribute to a better understanding of their practice.

3 Limitations

Any research has limitations. So does ours. The first is that the research is limited to three case organizations that differ in many respects. These differences may explain the differences we found between the three organizations. The second is that we did not start from a theory. We selected validated work dimensions from a large number of work design studies that were thought to be relevant for knowledge work. However, upon retrospect, this research approach played an important role, in that it helped us to develop a theory on knowledge work in the near future. A third limitation is that no cross relationships are investigated. For example, we have defined satisfaction as a dependent variable but within a broader theoretical model it probably will turn out to be an intermediate variable.