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The globalization of work and continuing advances in technology are changing the nature of the work force. Blue-collar workers are being replaced by information specialists who are sometimes called "knowledge workers." Knowledge workers are workers who can think, work with ideas, and use information to solve problems and make decisions. In terms of their skills and abilities, knowledge workers are people who are highly educated, creative, and computer literate and who have portable skills that allow them to move anywhere their intelligence, talent, and services are needed. Knowledge workers represent the fastest-growing segment of the work force. Their main value to organizations is their ability to gather and analyze information and make decisions that will benefit their companies. Knowledge workers are continually learning. The responsibility for preparing students and unskilled workers with the technical and cognitive skills required for "knowledge" work has been placed in the hands of education. Although some say that workplace education that prepares individuals with information technology skills required for jobs in the knowledge sector should become a national priority, others are pessimistic about the employment potential of individuals engaged in high-tech training. (A 17-item annotated bibliography constitutes the majority of this document.)
Knowledge Workers
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Knowledge Workers

The globalization of work and continuing advances in technology are changing the nature of the work force. Blue-collar workers are being replaced by information specialists called "knowledge workers"—workers who are "equipped to maintain and expand our technological leadership role in the next century" (Kelly 1998, p. 89); workers who can think, work with ideas, and make decisions (Shea 1998). Also known as "gold-collar" workers, knowledge workers are sometimes identified by their professional specialty, e.g., lawyer, doctor, programmer, information systems designer, information specialist, librarian, teacher, or scientist (Bender 1998; Halal 1998; McGinn and Raymond 1997-98). Other writers describe knowledge workers by their characteristics: people who can analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information and use that information to solve problems of variable content. A third way of describing knowledge workers is by their skills and abilities—people who are highly educated, creative, computer literate, and have portable skills that make it possible for them to move anywhere their intelligence, talent, and services are needed (Munk 1998). This Trends and Issues Alert discusses this new type of worker, which represents the fastest growing segment of the work force. It also examines issues related to their employment and training.

New technologies, which are taking over many of the routine tasks performed in the workplace, are directing workers toward the more complex tasks that require thinking, understanding, assimilating new knowledge, and problem solving. A new computer-guided system for finding defects in textiles does so with greater accuracy than human inspectors and enables the work to be accomplished at much faster speeds (Kelly 1989). High-tech rings worn by United Parcel Service cargo handlers technically scan packages as they are loaded and unloaded (Kelly 1998). The time-saving aspects of new technologies not only free employees for more sophisticated tasks, but also place increased pressure on them to develop new skills that will enable them to participate in the knowledge revolution that reflects the changing nature of the workplace (Halal 1998).

What exactly do "knowledge workers" do? Knowledge workers use their intellect to convert their ideas into products, services, or processes (Miller 1999). They "own" their knowledge (Verespej 1999). They can "sell it, trade it, or give it away and still own it" (Allee 1997, p. 7). Their main value to an organization is their ability to gather and analyze information and make decisions that will benefit the company. They are able to work collaboratively with and learn from each other; they are willing to take risks, expecting to learn from their mistakes rather than be criticized for them (Rogoski 1997).

Knowledge workers are continually learning, aware that knowledge has a limited shelf life (Allee 1997). In this information revolution, "brains have become more valuable than brawn" (Gordon 1997, p. 16).

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich places the responsibility for preparing students and unskilled workers with the technical and cognitive skills required for "knowledge" work in the hands of education (McCinn and Raymond 1997-98). The existing and future work force must be prepared to meet the challenges posed by technology, e.g., maximizing efficient use of technological innovations, internationalizing ideas, and continually learning to avoid technical obsolescence (Boutwell 1997).

What is the employment outlook for knowledge workers? Predictions are that the highly skilled will be the "crème de la crème" of white-collar workers. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a net increase of more than 10,000 information professionals in the U.S. labor force by 2006 (Bender 1998, p. 33). However, the BLS also predicts that 700,000 manufacturing jobs will disappear by the same year due to automation ("Knowledge Workers" 1997). Reich believes that the greatest challenge will be to retain these middle-class workers (McCinn and Raymond 1997-98). Workplace education that prepares individuals with information technology skills required for jobs in the knowledge sector must become a national priority in order to avoid growing inequalities (ibid.).

However, Boutwell (1997) is pessimistic about the employment potential of those engaged in high-tech training. He contends that "the need for a greater supply of high quality workers is a myth perpetuated by the vested interests of business" (p. 110). He predicts that this myth will be exposed when "80% of America's graduates, regardless of high tech training, will have to resign themselves to menial, routine, dead-end jobs" in the face of a need for ever-greater numbers of less-skilled, low-wage workers (ibid.). The following resources provide more in-depth discussion about the economic shift from manufacturing to knowledge workers and issues surrounding their employment.

Resources


Examines 12 principles that characterize knowledge and describes ways to make the most of knowledge assets in an organization. Emphasizes the driving values for creating and sharing knowledge, the individual and interactive nature of knowledge development, and pathways for building knowledge across multiple performance levels.


Identifies seven trends that will shape work environments over the next 10 years: the virtual environment, just-in-time workers, the ascendance of knowledge workers, computerized coaching and electronic monitoring, the growth of worker diversity, the aging work force, and the birth of the dynamic work force.


Identifies increasing demand for workers who have knowledge of information systems and describes knowledge management as the newest global business trend. Identifies benefits of employing knowledge managers who gather information and synthesize it into knowledge.


Focuses on the corporate restructuring that has displaced many workers whose jobs have become outdated and led to the creation of knowledge workers. Describes these workers as individuals who can be imported or exported by any country and who enable leaner, and meaner, business enterprise.

Declares that the underpopulation of developed countries will be a dominant factor for business in the next 2 decades and discusses his view that a supply of knowledge workers is the only comparative advantage to be realized by developed countries. Predicts that the turbulent nature of the world economy will be reflected in the continuing change in the nature and content of relevant knowledge.


Examines the complex tasks required in the new workplace and suggests the need for new approaches to training and more career education programs. Emphasizes the need for knowledge assimilation, problem-solving, and workload management skills.


Foresees a workforce composed of knowledge workers. Discusses the disappearance of traditional jobs and the introduction of a new workplace where organizations are structured according to performance: workers take on new roles, are more self-regulated, and control their work situations, complexity and change abound, and pay systems grow more diverse.


Identifies five steps necessary to transform the "cannot do" to the "can do" worker: (1) changing the way people think; (2) adapting to the new world of work; (3) adapting training programs to change; (4) building flexible organizations; and (5) reinventing what those organizations deliver.


Compares knowledge workers to concert musicians and their managers to conductors using the following analogy: the musicians (knowledge workers) have responsibility for some pieces of music (their work projects) and not others. They are divided into different sections (teams) based on their instruments and roles. They then work with a conductor (leader) to create a performance. They can be hired as permanent or contract players, and they can hold multiple affiliations simultaneously.


Discusses the need for industrial workers to be retained as knowledge workers and describes those workers as individuals who can gather, analyze, and disseminate information in such knowledge-based industries as computer, medical care, communications, and instrumentation.


Examines the changing workplace and the difficulty in predicting future changes that will be influenced by technology. It identifies some of the hot growth areas and jobs threatened by automation. Proposes roles knowledge workers will assume and how the business trend toward "talent for hire" will affect the work options of knowledge workers.


Identifies knowledge and intelligence as the main assets of today's businesses. Challenges businesses to help their employees invest, renew, and leverage their intellectual capital and offers three ways to do this: expand intelligence, encourage creativity and innovation, and exercise integrity in relationships.


Describes the characteristics of "blue-collar" workers, people born between 1965 and 1977 who represent the new work force and who, in comparison with baby boomers, are fewer in number. Describes ways in which businesses are courting these workers and allowing them to change the environments where they work.


Reports the need for companies to retain their knowledge workers by changing their corporate attitudes and structures, creating environments where knowledge is shared, nurturing loyalty, and offering positive reinforcements that include bonuses, stock options, benefits, and other perks that have value to knowledge workers.


Identifies some of the characteristics of knowledge workers and strategies companies can use to recruit and retain them: have a clear vision, create a learning environment, make a serious commitment to provide technology equipment, be active in benchmarking, encourage experimentation and tolerate "failure," and involve employees in establishing organizational structures.


Presents some of the prevailing views about employment in the new economy and the demand for knowledge workers and speculates on possible ramifications of the automation of information transmission. Challenges institutions to break the link between production and income and engage in creative activities that cannot be automated.

Vesespej, M. A. "Invest in People." Industry Week 248, no. 3 (February 1, 1999): 6-7.

Offers four keys to creating an environment where workers add value: (1) instill a desire for continuous learning in all workers; (2) establish a talent pool of workers at all levels; (3) recognize the importance of retaining talent; and (4) empower workers to be more productive.

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