

# The Caring and Keeping of Knowledge Workers

Karen Carleton, Med., MS, IPMA-CS

Critical in the quick-changing information age are employees who efficiently and effectively absorb, evaluate and synthesize information to solve problems and innovate. Competitive advantage requires organizations that learn and grow through their workforce. This goes beyond the rhetoric of saying, “people are our greatest asset” to truly *enable* employees to contribute. But how do you motivate and train these so-called knowledge workers? Solutions lie within the work itself and the workplace, while attending to the unique traits of this rising class of worker.

## Background

Twenty four years ago Senge (1990) introduced the *learning organization*, a dynamic concept related to ongoing workplace learning and change. Although debate rages on about how achievable this dynamic state, organizations must keep up with new developments or they quickly lose ground. Enter the knowledge worker: able to navigate complexity, handle ambiguous situations and develop creative solutions in a single bound. In 1959, management guru Peter Drucker (1985) coined the term *knowledge worker* (KW), as someone who “... works for a living at tasks of developing or using knowledge” (Rouse, n.d.). Examples of knowledge workers are researchers, consultants, business analysts, evaluators, and technical writers.

## Traits and Work Conditions

KWs typically have a high education level, exceptional soft skills and work on projects to address organizational problems. They are frequently aided by their network, technology, and a steady diet of learning. Yet how do we enable the productivity of KWs? They need challenge and variety, along with feeling valued for their contributions. Staff members who process information also need an environment that supports their performance. Advisable workplace conditions include having opportunities to collaborate and learn, being involved in setting their work parameters, having adequate resources (e.g. software, access, time), and a suitable workspace for concentrating. A knowledge worker’s initiative (i.e. *discretionary effort*) is further fed by having an inspiring and fair supervisor who offers praise and recognition in a workplace that promotes excellence. Paramount to long-term KW motivation is challenging work that adds real value by using their skills. Even the most highly qualified and most motivated employee is derailed by a bad system that has misassigned her!

Frederick Herzberg reminds us that pay and benefits are hygiene factors or “satisfiers” at best, temporary carrots at worst. The best practices for engaging and retaining your knowledge workers occurs at all levels in your organization:

**Work level:** challenging and varied work, collaboration opportunities, valued on-the-job learning and experience, and work-life balance

**Workplace level:** a supportive manager, enabling environment (i.e. recognition, praise, distraction-free workspace), and growth or career development options (i.e. desirable incentives)

**Worker level:** meaningful work, and (where possible) immediate rewards for well done work

# The Caring and Keeping of Knowledge Workers (cont'd)

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With one or more of these conditions missing, a knowledge worker may find other work, or quit but not tell you! Across sectors organizations are wise to take cues from the non-profit world, where highly meaningful work drives staff engagement and retention. Knowledge workers – like *all* workers - need to feel their contributions are valued. How is your organization caring for and keeping its knowledge workers?

## References

Drucker, P.F. (1985). *Managing the knowledge worker in, The changing world of the executive*, pp.112-117. New York, NY: Times Books.

Rouse, M. (n.d.). Knowledge worker. *Whatis.com*, <http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/definition/knowledge-worker>

## Related Learning Resources

Carleton, K. & Roithmayr, T. (2014, August 1). *Assessing and addressing workforce performance conditions (3 part video series)*, based on a session delivered for CSTD's Symposium: Calgary (June 6, 2014), <http://youtu.be/bQ0Z2xGUheE?list=PLemWLGWatT0KmYXaLPEbvONAFWb2PvNQ>

Carleton, K. (2014). *Working from Home (interview)*. CTV Edmonton: Alberta Primetime. (aired June 2, 2014), <http://youtu.be/tDzU0oA5aCU>

Carleton, K. (2011, June). *How to motivate and retain knowledge workers*. *International Journal of Management*. Vol 28 (2), pp. 459-468, <http://lnkd.in/bQFnP8R>

Performance Solutions Corp. (n.d.). *FREE organizational performance downloads*, <http://performcorp.ca/resources/>

*Five Best Employee Motivators*

*Organizational Learning & Change Surveys*

*Performance Troubleshooter*

*Performance Support Mini-Audit*



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Karen Carleton is the President of Performance Solutions, a workplace learning and performance consultancy based in Edmonton, Alberta. She partners with managers who want better results through their people. Using people-centered research to assess and address challenges, Karen adds value to employers and employees alike. After determining the difference between current and desired results, Karen crafts solutions to close the gap by building capacity and supporting performance.

Karen has worked in all sectors and with diverse populations including industrial workers, Aboriginals, and immigrants. A frequent presenter, her background includes Master's level degrees in Performance Technology (Boise State University), and Workplace Learning (University of Calgary). Published in the *International Journal of Management* and *Performance Improvement*, Karen teaches part-time for MacEwan University's Human Resources Management program.

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