

## MOTIVATING KNOWLEDGE TEAMS

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### Abstract

The importance of knowledge work has undoubtedly grown over the last decades, economically, socially, organizationally as well as individually, and it is continuing to grow. The term 'knowledge work' is taken here to refer to work in which both process and product are knowledge intensive and of which continuous learning and new knowledge creation are key components. This reference to learning is important: knowledge work is hardly ever purely the application or exploitation of existing knowledge in standard situations leading to standard products. Repetition and standard cases alone cannot define the processes, situations and products of knowledge work (cf. assertions of the close links between knowledge and learning along with the recognition that knowledge is always situated, contested and emerging or provisional; e.g. Blackler, 1995; Tsoukas, 1996). Obviously, gradations as to the degree of knowledge creation in knowledge work are likely to occur: scientific education is more repetitive than scientific research, the products of banks and insurance companies are usually more alike than those of consultancy firms, etcetera. Motivation of knowledge workers is a key determinant of the quality of knowledge work, even more than in the case of other work. An important variable that defines the setting in which work motivation is formed concerns the organizational structure. As to organizational structures for knowledge work, particularly the recent elaboration of the team concept in knowledge work situations appears as a promising field of research (e.g. Mohrman *et al.*, 1995; Fisher & Fisher, 1998).

The paper explores the field of research that emerges when the three variables mentioned before are combined: knowledge work, work motivation, and the team concept. Separately each of the domains defined by these variables have attracted a substantial if not massive amount of research. Also the three bipartite combinations of these subjects have all attracted research attention, albeit in varying degrees. Apart from the already mentioned combination

of knowledge work and the team concept in knowledge teams this also applies to motivation in teams (e.g. Weaver *et al.*, 1997), and motivating knowledge workers (e.g. Tampoe, 1996; Szulanski, 2000). However, the combination of all three together has received hardly any attention so far. Yet a combined understanding of how the interaction between organizational structure and motivational issues appears as a prerequisite for understanding differences in the quality of knowledge work. It also appears crucial for understanding how knowledge work can or cannot be managed. The paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the motivation in knowledge teams by identifying relevant constructs, the elements that define these constructs and the relationships among these constructs and their elements. In its procedures to meet the purpose of establishing a theoretical framework aimed at understanding work motivation in knowledge teams, it follows the principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). Given the large body of relevant theoretical work concerning the constituent concepts of motivation in knowledge teams it involves a substantial theoretical exploration stage combined with an investigation of knowledge work teams in practice (cf. the empirical ‘grounding’ of the theory to be constructed). For the exploration of relevant theoretical constructs it starts from the received self-efficacy model of work motivation (Bandura, 1997) and goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1984) along with the elaboration of these theories into a model for ‘collective efficacy’ as developed by Weaver *et al.* (1997). Next, the purpose of the research is to examine how the application and elaboration of this model in knowledge work situations calls for amendments, enhancements or perhaps even partial refutation of the model. The empirical stages of the research concern multiple data collection rounds in three organizations with several knowledge teams operating within these organizations. Given the nature of the research the purpose of the empirical part of the research is not to test the adequateness of proposed theoretical models and propositions based on these models, but to direct the generation of the theoretical framework. Data collection methods include the examination of documents, individual interviews with key informants, team members and team managers and collective interviews with several members of the teams. All situations examined concern knowledge teams with a high degree of non-repetitiveness of work, which in the context of the research is seen as an important condition for the comparability of these situations. Yet also differences occur between the work of the knowledge teams and the settings in which they operate. The research pays particular attention to the question as to which differences occur and how these differences affect the construction of an overarching theoretical framework.

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