Knowledge workers and their relationships with organisations

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There has been much discussion about the ambiguities of the terms knowledge work and knowledge workers (Alvesson, 2007; Fincham, 2007; Kelloway and Barling 2000). Despite this there has emerged a degree of commonality in the terms used and associated with the knowledge work discussion and latterly there has been an increase in discussion of the organisational context as a defining feature of knowledge work (Alvesson, 2007; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Von Nordenflycht 2010). It is the contextualisation of the discussion which allows further development of our understandings of knowledge workers, how they relate to organisations and also the implications for the management practices which surround this group. Empirical studies (Benson and Brown, 2007; Horwitz et al , 2003; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Tam et al , 2002) have sought to examine the unique features of knowledge workers in contrast to non-knowledge workers particularly with regard to organisational commitment and professional identity, job satisfaction and intention to quit. Commonalities within these studies would suggest that a greater depth of understanding of knowledge workers is emerging. However, it also appears that there is inconsistency within the subjects and settings chosen to represent knowledge workers and therefore it could be suggested that any consensus is overplayed. For example, research is conducted respectively in a scientific research organisation with subjects defined as knowledge workers based on a self-score of key knowledge work attributes; six knowledge-based industries whereby CEO's report on definitions of knowledge workers and strategies used for managing these workers; software workers in both software houses and divisions within the telecoms industry and lastly money market dealers and systems developers in telecoms and financial services firms (Benson and Brown, 2007; Horwitz et al , 2003; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Tam et al , 2002). The range of organisational contexts and types of workers in the aforementioned studies provide a mixed picture in pursuit of furthering our understandings of who knowledge workers are, how they perceive themselves and the way that they relate to organisations.

However, it is broadly and consistently acknowledged that an appropriate occupational example of knowledge work would be software developers (Scarborough, 1999; Alvesson, 2007; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Tam et al, 2002). Whilst differences in empirical work exist there is widespread agreement that supports the use of software developers as archetypal knowledge

workers. The organisational context has often been overlooked with respect to the proposition that these knowledge workers are distinctly different from non-knowledge workers (or traditional workers) due to their work being located within the knowledge economy. Therefore it is within knowledge intensive organisational contexts and using this archetype that is reported here. It reports on an exploratory study of a group of software developers to examine their perceptions of their work and their relationships with the organisations in which they work. From this, a theoretical framework and a set of hypotheses have been developed which seek to capture the core elements of the relationship between knowledge workers and the organisations which employ them. This framework, drawing on the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) organisational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997), occupational identity (Van Dick et al, 2004), goal orientation (VandeWalle, 1997), and creativity (Zhang and Bartol, 2010) is explored and implications for the range of and responses to HR practices used in managing knowledge workers are discussed.

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