

Importance of Knowledge Workers in Global Economy

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What is a Knowledge Worker?

A knowledge worker is anyone who works for a living at the tasks of developing or using knowledge. For example, a knowledge worker might be someone who works at any of the tasks of planning, acquiring, searching, analyzing, organizing, storing, programming, distributing, marketing, or otherwise contributing to the transformation and commerce of information and those (often the same people) who work at using the knowledge so produced. A term first used by Peter Drucker in his 1959 book, *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, the knowledge worker includes those in the information technology fields, such as programmers, systems analysts, technical writers, academic professionals, researchers, and so forth. The term is also frequently used to include people outside of information technology, such as lawyers, teachers, scientists of all kinds, and also students of all kinds.

Knowledge workers in today's workforce are individuals who are valued for their ability to interpret information within a specific subject area. They will often advance the overall understanding of that subject through focused analysis, design and/or development. They use research skills to define problems and to identify alternatives. Fueled by their expertise and insight, they work to solve those problems, in an effort to influence company decisions, priorities and strategies. Knowledge workers may be found across a variety of information technology roles, but also among professionals like teachers, lawyers, architects, physicians, nurses, engineers and scientists. As businesses increase their dependence on information technology, the number of fields in which knowledge workers must operate has expanded dramatically.

Peter Drucker, who was the first person to describe knowledge workers to any substantial degree (in his 1959 book *Landmarks of Tomorrow*), said as far back as 1968 that:

To make knowledge work productive will be the great management task of this century, just as to make manual work productive was the great management task of the last century.

Then in 1997 Drucker went even further out along the knowledge worker limb:

The productivity of knowledge and knowledge workers will not be the only competitive factor in the world economy. It is, however, likely to become the decisive factor, at least for most industries in the developed countries.

Why did Drucker-and why should we-believe that knowledge workers and their productivity were so important to the world economy? There are a variety of reasons.

First, they are a large and growing category of workers. If we can't figure out how to make more than a quarter of the labor force more productive, we're going to have problems with our economy overall. They are also the most expensive type of worker that organizations employ, so it's doubly shameful if they're not as productive as they could be.

Secondly, they are key to the growth of many economies. Agricultural and manufacturing work have generally become commoditized, and are moving to the economies where it can be performed at the lowest cost. The only forms of agricultural or industrial work that survive in sophisticated economies are those in which a high degree of knowledge has been injected-for example, in biotechnology manufacturing, or in "precision farming," where the amount of fertilizer and pesticides administered to a given crop are carefully monitored using GPS devices in tractors. If agriculture and manufacturing are moving to countries with low labor costs (China is a particularly good example), the jobs that remain in the so-called knowledge-based economies are particularly critical to countries' economic survival.

It's not clear exactly what workers in the US, Western Europe, and Japan are going to do for a living in the future (other than providing local services), but it is clear that if these economies are to prosper, the jobs of many of the workers must be particularly knowledge-intensive.

It's already apparent that the firms with the highest degree and quality of knowledge work tend to be the fastest-growing and most profitable.

Microsoft, for example, is among the most profitable organizations in the history of the planet.

Pharmaceutical firms not only save peoples' lives with their drug treatments, they also tend to have high profit margins.

"Growth industries" generally tend to be those with a high proportion of knowledge workers.

Within organizations, knowledge workers tend to be closely aligned with the organization's growth prospects. Knowledge workers in management roles come up with new strategies. Knowledge workers in R&D and engineering create new products. Knowledge workers in marketing package up products and services in ways that appeal to customers. Without knowledge workers there would be no new products and services, and no growth.

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