The necessity to be attractive to autonomous professionals

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The central question in this contribution is whether there are economic developments which necessitate creating attractive organisational forms for autonomous professionals? And what might these organisational forms be like?

The reasoning which lies at the heart of the answers to these questions is based on the following train of thought. The most important developments in the economy are taking place in the direction of a knowledge economy. Traditional economic factors such as capital, raw materials and physical labour will diminish in importance by comparison to the ability to develop and apply knowledge (Drucker, 1993). This knowledge must then necessarily result in step by step improvements and radical innovations. These views prompt considering possible organisational forms which could foster this form of knowledge productivity (Kessels, 2001). The prominent players in the knowledge economy are the knowledge workers. With a view to the special ability of individuals, teams and entire organisations to acquire relevant information, create new knowledge and apply this to step by step improvements and the radical innovation of work processes, products and services, it is important to investigate the factors which either aid or hamper this process of knowledge productivity. In this perspective on knowledge development in companies the new professional is central. In view of their economic significance, the new professionals will become ever more aware of their valuable talents and indeed seek out or personally create those work environments which are beneficial to the development of these valuable talents. Two main motives are probably involved in this:

1. What are my most important talents, motivations and motives?
2. In which environment do these have the best chances and possibilities?

In the course of researching these motives, I have had discussions with a group of HRD professionals. A short report of these follows here.

Who are the new professionals?

We are already familiar with the professionals who have stepped out of the large organisations and have joined networks of like-minded people where they can engage more directly and with greater freedom in their professional activities, and without the restrictive limitations of a large organisation, of imposed norms and values which are not their own and where the individual is ultimately subordinate to goals set from the top. The growing group of entrepreneurial advisors and free agents could well be an indication of an increasing need for professional autonomy. Autonomy refers both to having the space to influence the setting of goals and the way in which the work is organised oneself, as well as having the ability to actually make use of this space. Autonomy therefore does not only refer to a large degree of self-regulating, self-awareness, belief in one's own competence, and emancipation, but also to the characteristics of a workplace which offers room for the critical reflection on work methods, goals, views and principles.

Autonomous professionals do not necessarily have to be highly educated. Production workers must also be able to cooperate, take responsibility and regularly make creative contributions, all of which is only possible given a certain degree of autonomy (Salling Olesen, 2000).

What is probably most important is that the new professionals primarily make a choice for the content aspect of the work and more strongly identify with this than either the organisation, the status of the function or the secondary employment benefits. This conjures up an image of employees with a strong confidence in their own ability, with a clear awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and with a realistic idea about the manner in which and the extent to which they can influence their workplace. (Self-)critical and emancipatory aspects probably play an important role in the development of their work identity. These employees are probably less dependent on the judgement of managers and the views from within their environment about what is and what is not important. Influential colleagues in their own sector however probably do have this influence on their work identity. The bond they have with their field of expertise, also indeed by being in contact with like-minded individuals outside the organisation, probably also leads to the decreased influence which the implicit norms and values of the organisation exerts on their self-image. On the other hand, elements which arise from a social orientation to the importance of respect, diversity, sustainability, cooperation and the development of social capital, probably do play an important role in forming the identity of autonomous professionals.

Given such a profile of the new employee, established views within organisations about leadership, authority, hierarchical position, compliance, loyalty, strategic goal setting, and ownership in the form of anonymous shareholders, all come under pressure. In particular, knowledge intensive organisations which are almost exclusively dependent on the intellectual capital of their knowledge workers, are being confronted with difficult design and organisational questions. How can I be attractive to autonomous professionals? A large degree of local autonomy for knowledge workers is a potential threat to the centrally driven strategy. The recognition of the valuable talent of the individual knowledge worker is at loggerheads with the anonymous ownership of the shareholder. Compliance with the manager, merely because of his higher position, does not come easily to those with a high degree of self-awareness and a belief in their own ability. The more a manager lacks prestige in the field, the more he clings to restrictive rules and procedures, the less effort he makes to act with integrity and the more heavily he relies on position, the more the tension will increase.

Economic developments and the necessity for knowledge productivity.

Kogut and Zander present an important and relatively new perspective on organised economic activity in which they define a company as ‘a social community specializing in the speed and efficiency in the creation and transfer of knowledge’ (1996, p. 503). The assumption is that in a developing knowledge economy, the character of the work will gradually change and acquire more and more characteristics of learning processes. Learning and development are then no longer *requirements* for carrying out work and functioning better but will have become integrated components of the work itself. The core component of work is then indeed knowledge production.

So it is no longer about standardisation, stable uniformity and efficiency. Rather, it is about what is unusual, unexpected, special, unique, distinct. This applies in particular to services. But even in production environments, machines and computers have taken over the standard processes and routine work. The knowledge worker will be especially focussed on improvements and innovations. This also demands a different approach to organising the

work. Perhaps the traditional style of management is contra-productive for knowledge productivity. The question now is in what kind of environment does the autonomous professional thrive. That is probably an environment in which it is pleasant to work together with like-minded people on meaningful, content based issues. This means that it is important to pay a great deal of attention to both the social component of work, expressed in mutual attractiveness, as well as to the content component of the work which makes a demand on individual passion and enthusiasm for a personal theme. Without these aspects, it is difficult to be smart in the service of the organisation whilst this is precisely what it is all about in knowledge work. Not only do material aspects play a role in this mutual attractiveness (between employees, but also in the relationship of employee - organisation); but also elements such as shared values, notions about integrity, sustainability, social responsibility and consideration for surroundings and environment.
From a knowledge economical perspective, it is of vital importance for an organisation to explicitly pay attention to these aspects and so be able to be attractive to the new generation of knowledge workers who are after all the most important sources of a modern business. This indicates mutual attraction and passion as an economic necessity.

This type of working-learning of the new professional can probably not be organised, planned, controlled, monitored and assessed in a conventional managerial way. It is even questionable whether our conventional way of thinking about strategy, management and performance are valid in a knowledge economy because the traditional perspective on work and learning is mostly based on a notion of planned and controlled production methods in a standardised and efficient procedure. Participation in a knowledge economy, in which improvement and innovation are necessary to long-term survival, has an enormous influence on our perspectives on management and the role of employees.

The knowledge which is vital for improvement and innovation could be defined as an individual, personal competence. ‘Knowledge needs to be understood as the *potential for action* that doesn’t only depend upon stored information but also on the individual interacting with it.’ (Malhotra, 2000, p 249; italics in the original). The knowledge which an organisation needs in order to be able to participate in a knowledge economy is closely linked to the personal skills of its workers. In order to be able to develop these skills, an attractive learning environment within the workplace is necessary. The knowledge economy after all requires an employee to develop into an autonomous, independent individual who is continuously working on personal growth (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). However, such a learning path necessitates an inviting social context. The development of intellectual capital can only take place in an environment with a rich social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Characteristics of a favourable work environment for autonomous professionals
If individual knowledge development forms the basis of the knowledge productive workplace, then this learning-working will involve paying a lot of attention to reflection, learning from mistakes, critically sharing views, questioning group thinking, asking for feedback, being able to experiment, sharing in each others knowledge and having space to consider one’s own career. These elements, which characterise critical reflective working behaviour, have been thoroughly researched by Van Woerkom (2003). She refers to characteristics of a knowledge intensive workplace in which the main role is played by an emancipated, autonomous professional. Such workplaces encourage employees ‘to pursue their interests, to find personal meaning, and to adapt to and change their life circumstances. (...) adult learners are assumed

to be capable of framing their own choices, reflecting on their options, and making responsible, informed decisions that serve their interest.' (Percival, 1996, p. 138).

Offering room for personal development and autonomy to benefit improvement and innovation has undeniable consequences for the involvement of employees with their work. As long as innovation can be transformed into economic prosperity there are as yet few problems. Howell (2001) discovered evidence in her research that as long as employees actively participate in improvement processes, they will also take more and more responsibility for these processes. Directly related to this however is that employees will also ask themselves whether their personal interests correspond with those of the organisation. Van Woerkom (2003) also refers in her research to the problematical aspects of critical reflective work behaviour. Whilst autonomy, effort and involvement are aimed at continuing the established interests there is nothing the matter. When motivated by the same level of involvement, employees begin to ask critical questions about goals, interests, basic assumptions and notions, then this critical behaviour is less desirable and the organisation makes this known in no uncertain terms. The professional then has the choice of giving up his autonomy or of looking for a more suitable workplace. Neither of these consequences are beneficial to the knowledge productivity of the organisation.

Creating a favourable learning climate is becoming more important.

This leads inevitably to the question as to whether the autonomous professional as knowledge worker – and therefore as a key player in a knowledge economy - actually wants to apply his special skills for organisations which are neither very particular about integrity (towards clients and thus probably also towards employees), nor about caring about sustainability and environment, nor about social responsibility, and where the leaders, out of a need for self-enrichment consciously damage the interests of the organisation, employees and the community? For a new generation of employees with a special talent, the following question crops up: for which organisation do I want to apply myself and for which would I rather not and what are the arguments which feature in this weighing up process?
Will organisations which have no opinion about this be able to succeed in drawing highly educated knowledge workers?

Another topical question is whether autonomy is a temporary product of a period of great economic prosperity which will then disappear when the economy lands in a recession. Or is this phenomenon the characteristic of a more lasting development in which the ability to create, share and apply knowledge is no longer limited to a small group of researchers? If the latter is the case, the 'new independents' in a knowledge society should experience less problems during an economic recession, and the 'old dependents' all the more.

Professionals voice their opinion
When preparing this article, I was able to discuss the themes which have been raised here with a group of HRD professionals[1]. When asked the question 'What demands do you make on your workplace in order to be able to work pleasantly?' they gave the following answers: "You must be able to rely on one another by being able to talk about your work".

[1] The discussion took place on January 8 2004 in the St. Martinushoeve in Halle Zoersel near Antwerp. Participants of de Vlaamse FCE-Leergang Opleidingkunde took part in the discussion: Birgit De Clerck, Marcel Terlaak, Mieke Slotboom, Mirjam Burgers-Gerristen, Willie Bennik, Willy De Weerdt, Peter Van Son, Geert Luyts, Els Eyckmans, José Hermans, Ann Dobbeni and Dagwin Roelants. I would like to thank them for their openhearted contribution.

“There needs to be something to innovate otherwise I’m out of here”.
“I want to see progress, not inertia. I must be able to break free”.
“You must be given room to be autonomous”.
“If I don’t have any impact, I leave”.
“It is the team members in particular who decide whether an organisation is attractive for me”.
“Working on socially significant projects is important to me”.
“Working together with (high)schools adds an extra dimension to my work”.
“In working for a large organisation, one is looking for involvement close-by. The official goals are very remote”.

What makes working difficult?
“What I miss is a workmate with whom I can communicate on the same wavelength”.
“It is awful when somebody says, that’s just the way we do things here”.
“The lack of recognition and respect from the management weighs like a heavy burden”.
“I find it difficult to work towards goals which I do not support”.
“You often have to play along in the political game-playing”.
“The organisation does not treat its employees properly. That makes me insecure. It could happen to me too”.
“Once you enter the arena you have to fight”.
“It becomes difficult if you notice that your organisation is indirectly involved with the weapons industry, child labour and nuclear waste.”

In Ten Have, Weusten & Bolweg (2000) we find similar remarks: “*Personal involvement, pleasure, autonomy, equality and giving meaning have become the features which characterise the way the new employee regards his job. He has a preference for the ‘warm, soft’ organisation. He is social, considers teamwork important, wants a career perspective, wants to be able to work autonomously, and cries out for.*” (p. 25). ().

Implications for the development of HRD?
In this article, attention has been drawn to a number of plausible developments concerning the relationship between working and learning and the way in which knowledge workers in particular are involved in this.
The most important implication for HRD is that it will become increasingly important to create a favourable learning environment in the workplace. HRD can make a contribution to actively promoting this learning on behalf of carrying out knowledge work. Because working and developing will become further integrated, the domain of HRD will also become apparent primarily in the daily workplace. If it is necessary for the vital attractiveness to autonomous professionals that the goals of the organisation are derived from the collective goals of the most important knowledge workers, then HRD will be faced with a difficult task. It requires after all a clearly defined position which is not directly dictated by the ruling interests of the top of the organisation and the anonymous owners. The emancipatory aspect, which is a prerequisite for acquiring autonomy, will also apply to the HRD professional. If the HRD function is to be relevant to autonomous professionals, then it must be able to understand their motives and motivations.

Objections which can be raised are that not everyone has a need for autonomy, not everyone is capable of self-directing, and that emancipation is an elitist idea which only applies to a small group of yuppies. Also, a lot of work will remain whereby knowledge barely plays a role, where employees would become unhappy if their job changes; and the passion people

have, inasmuch as they have it, does not necessarily lie in their work. Is the need for regulation, clarity, uniformity and work security inherited and given, or learned in order to be able to survive in a constrained environment at the cost of independence and the development of a personal talent?
Naturally, the issues surrounding autonomy, emancipation and knowledge work only become meaningful in a specific context, and it is far from common to all organisations and all employees. However, from the perspective of the increasing complexity of work and the necessity for participation in social forms of knowledge work, it is of some importance to stimulate the self-directing and personal development rather than to trivialise their meaning (Harrison & Kessels, 2004).

It is even not unimaginable that the autonomous professionals are precursors of a new generation conflict. There is after all a risk that the present-day, ruling managers, who have become great and mighty in a thought-, work- and living environment which is gradually disappearing, do not notice that an undercurrent has arisen in which the above mentioned elements play a large part. Because they are not sensitive to such things, they do not perceive the undercurrent in time and can certainly not respond adequately. The desire for autonomy and emancipation which is in play is something which they will find difficult to link directly to economic interests and will therefore ignore or even reject it. Such a generation conflict can intensify further because the new generation has developed a method of communication which is strongly influenced by ICT (E-mail, SMS, Chat, ICQ) with which the current generation has little connection and this will make the dialogue even more difficult. If HRD considers facilitating and coaching as belonging to its field of expertise, then here lies an important substantial task to lead organisations towards a design and form which is favourable for a new generation of knowledge workers.

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