Rehumanising Knowledge Work through Fluctuating Support Networks: A Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory Methodology Session C: Business and Management

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Abstract

This study employed classic grounded theory methodology to produce a theory of rehumanising knowledge work through fluctuating support networks in the knowledge workplace. Data consisted of field notes and transcripts from personal interviews and focus group sessions. Participants were representative of the public and private sectors and a variety of professional fields that fall under the general rubric of knowledge work. Data were analysed using the full complement of procedures that comprise classic grounded theory methodology. These include theoretical sensitivity, initial open coding, constant comparison of empirical indicators, core variable emergence, delimiting and selective coding, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation through interchangeability of indicators, conceptual memoing, analytic rules for hand sorting of conceptual memos and the emergence of theoretical codes that integrate the theory.

The resultant thesis explains the basic social structural process of fluctuating support networks through which knowledge workers self-organise to overcome dehumanised work environments, consequent of a rapidly changing workplace context. Such networks operate outside the formal structures of organisations. They are epiphenomenal - self-emerging, self-organising, and self-sustaining. Participation is voluntary and intuitive.

The core variable of the theory is the basic social psychological process of rehumanising. Through fluctuating support networks, knowledge workers rehumanise their work and their work environments. Rehumanising gives meaning to work while sustaining energy and commitment. Rehumanising is characterised by authenticity, depth and meaning, recognition and respect, safety and healing and kindred sharing. Fluctuating support network relationships offer members validation and subtle support. Through network participation, members find ways to pursue shared interests and passions. Network activities are characterised by challenge, experimentation, creativity and learning. They provide members with renewed energy and learning. The resultant sense of achievement builds member confidence and increases passion for sustained network engagement.

Introduction

As a rule, individuals have always endeavoured to humanise their circumstances. The workplace is simply another arena for this effort and one where the need to do so has increased as the workplace seems to have become more and more dehumanised as a result of persistent and largely unpredictable change. This study's theory of rehumanising knowledge work through fluctuating support networks addresses knowledge workers' concerns with this dehumanising impact and explains how they resolve their concerns.

Methodology

The study employed classic grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005: Glaser & Holton, 2004). As a research strategy, grounded theory is particularly well suited for exploration of the amorphous nature of emergent and informal organisational entities. The method enables the researcher to get close to the phenomenon under study through extensive and iterative data collection and analysis, responding to latent patterns of social behaviour as they emerge from the data and, through their conceptualisation, serving as a guide for successive data collection and analyses. Thus, the method's twin foundations of constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling require the researcher to become intimate with her data and its conceptual underpinnings, thereby enabling substantive theory development.

Data Sources

Knowledge work is characterised as relatively unstructured and organisationally contingent, reflecting the changing demands of organisations (Scarborough, 1999). While the term 'knowledge worker' has assumed an elevated status, its popularity is not matched with definitional clarity. For the purposes of this study, I adopted the parameters offered by Brint (2001) to define knowledge work. He suggests that knowledge work can be defined as work where the speed of change – particularly technological change - is an important factor, where new issues requiring expert analysis regularly emerge and where the provision of service to clients and the knowledge required to do so is embedded in the service providers themselves rather than in standardised and commodified processes.

The knowledge workers who were the source of the data for this study were drawn from the fields of business, technology, education, healthcare and various other public or professional services. In summary, 61 individuals participated in the study; 27 through personal interviews with an additional 34 individuals participating in focus group sessions. Interviews were conducted between October 2001 and January 2004. The focus groups occurred during two retreats held in June 2002 and November 2002. These data sources were augmented with additional data from participant observations and casual conversations with knowledge workers as opportunities arose. Extant literature was integrated into the emerging theory as an additional data source through constant comparison with the emergent concepts.

The Emergent Theory

Knowledge workers identify the increasing dehumanisation of their work and work environments as a particular concern. Fluctuating support networks are a basic social structural process through which knowledge workers self-organise to resolve this concern. The networks assist knowledge workers to cope with change, their resistance to change and the resultant dehumanisation that they experience in their work and their work environments.

Positive relationships and intellectual challenge attract knowledge workers to such networks where their participation offers a sense of protection and control in an uncertain work environment. The networks are self-emergent and operate outside the formal structures of an organisation. They may transcend professional boundaries, serving as meta communication sources for members while meeting diverse needs for socialisation, knowledge sharing and collaborative engagement as well as offering broad-based access to expertise.

The Changing Knowledge Workplace

Today's knowledge workplace is increasingly one of complexity, compression and intensification resultant of continuous and often rapid change (Foley, 2002).   The compression of time created by communications technologies and by increased workloads, resulting from organisational restructuring and downsizing, has fostered compressed, dehumanised interactions.

Coping with Change

Coping with persistent and unpredictable change in the workplace diverts the attention and energy of knowledge workers, eroding both organisational structures and work outputs. The complexity, compression and turbulence of change have raised levels of workplace stress so that it is now a significant factor for many. Managers describe the immensity of the change underway in organisations as causing many workers to give up and barely function. Motivation and commitment decline.

Resistance to Change

Over time, the stress of coping with change creates uncertainty and generates a resistance to further change. Knowledge workers respond in various ways. Some silo their efforts leading to isolation and organizational ossification. Some adopt a cynical disengagement leading to opportunistic behaviours, cynicism and scepticism. Others engage in denial and cling to the status quo. Still others awfulise their situations leading to negativity and pessimism and fostering poor working habits that further erode the organisational environment and reduce productivity.

Resistance to change leads to worker entrenchment and an antipathetic culture characterised by negativity and a fear of further change that diminishes organisational performance through fragmentation, stasis, paralysis and ossification. The uncertainty, ambiguity and conflict inherent in the changing workplace context induce psychological and physiological stress for many workers (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Fear of change reinforces the desire for equilibrium and maintenance of the status quo. As both workers and organisations wrestle with the challenges of coping with change and resistance to change, a dynamic tension ensues. The result is a downward spiral of mutual dehumanisation.

Dehumanisation

This loss of the human dimension in workplace interactions is characterised by a work environment that is compressed, fearful, isolating, bureaucratic and legalistic; by interactions that are atomised and inauthentic and by work assignments that erode autonomy and identity. The organizational climate is highly volatile and competitive. Fewer organisations seem prepared to invest in people; instead, they "churn" workers, shifting and divesting human capital as deemed necessary (Cappelli, 2004). Even those who retain their jobs are not spared in this environment. The heightened stress, increased workloads and perpetual insecurity of this "survivor syndrome" can reduce job commitment, lowering morale and job satisfaction (Vahtera et al., 2004).

Production-focused work silos create harried environments with stresses and disappointments that leave many workers feeling unrecognised and devalued. The organisational quest for efficiency reduces opportunities to facilitate relationship building, compromises valuable conversations and erodes trust and collaboration.
To cope, workers may resort to playing roles in organisations. They assume corporate identities, leading to inauthentic voices and creating disconnection between what individuals really feel and what they feel they must voice. The disconnection erodes identity and purpose in work. Over time, nothing feels real and knowledge workers speak of longing for a return to connecting with what they value - what they are passionate about. In short, they long to rehumanise their workplaces.

Rehumanising

Rehumanising is the core concept in the grounded theory of fluctuating support networks. It is the basic social psychological process that explains how knowledge worker restore the human dimension in their work relationships and working environments. Rehumanising is characterised by *authenticity, depth and meaning, recognition and respect, safety and healing* and *kindred sharing.*

> *Authenticity*
Authenticity accelerates likening and bonding of members, facilitating interaction and open relationships that enable networks to fluctuate freely. Specialised expertise can silo and isolate knowledge workers. Career paths into management level positions can progressively distance them from their areas of expertise and leave them feeling vulnerable and stressed yet emotional displays are frequently restricted to guard against being seen as weak. The resultant isolating of expertise, progressive distancing and guarding of emotions can compromise authenticity in the workplace.

> *Depth and Meaning*
The depth and meaning that characterises fluctuating support network interactions creates a stickiness that bonds network members to each other and to their work. Participation in fluctuating support networks is deeply

experiential and can be intense and transformational for individual members. Depth and meaning is characterised by commitment and purpose, challenge and learning.

Recognition and Respect

Recognition and respect for diversity and individuality enhance authenticity and encourage creativity and sharing within the network.

Safety and Healing

Rehumanising also offers safety and healing by creating an enabling context for coping with change in the workplace. The safety and healing characteristic of rehumanising provides respite from organisational turbulence, insulating and protecting members so that they can cope with the instability of their organisational and professional environments.

Kindred Sharing

Kindred sharing facilitates openness, network bonding and mutual respect, generating energy, creativity and self-confidence in network members. Kindred sharing deepens commitment and purpose in the mutual engagement of network members by adding depth and meaning to network interactions.

Kindred sharing is moderated by network size and fluctuation patterns. Smaller, more intimate networks facilitate kindred sharing whereas large, loosely connected networks mitigate intimacy and kindred sharing. Kindred sharing is strongest among the core members of a network. When knowledge workers are isolated in their expertise or are continually pressed for time in meeting organisational demands, their opportunities for sustained and intimate interaction are reduced.

Stages in the Process of Rehumanising

The rehumanising process involves three stages – *Finding and Likening, Igniting Passions* and *Mutual Engagement*. The Finding and Likening stage is a sub-core process that functions as an amplifying causal loop characterised by the development of an altruistic atmosphere, connectedness and trust. As altruistic atmosphering, connectedness and trust build, or amplify, members move easily into the second stage of the Rehumanising process. This second stage – Igniting Passions - is the catalytic middle stage that facilitates the symbiotic relationship, continuous amplification and interdependent functioning of the sub-core processes of Finding and Likening and Mutual Engagement. The dynamic capacity of this median stage sustains the overall Rehumanising process by continuously generating confidence, energy, commitment and bonding among network members. The Mutual Engagement stage is another sub-core process that also functions as an amplifying causal loop. The Mutual Engagement stage is characterised by creativity, challenge, experimentation and learning.

Finding and Likening

The process of finding may be serendipitous or intentional. While members may find each other through reputation, establishing credibility and mutuality are prerequisites to sustaining a desire to network. After finding one another and establishing credibility and mutuality, network members quickly self-identify and self-organise, moving beyond finding to likening. Likening is the mutual attraction that develops between and among network members once they find one another.

Likening facilitates authenticity, respect and kindred sharing and is characterised by altruistic atmosphering, connectedness and trust. Likening is negatively correlated to opportunistic interaction and disrespect. Connectedness strengthens and sustains network interactions. Trust is both antecedent to likening as well as an outcome of likening and facilitates kindred sharing and bonding.

Igniting Passions

Likening ignites passion for network interaction and mutual engagement. The relationship between likening and igniting passions is an amplifying causal looping process. The more network members liken, the more passion is ignited and the more passion, the more likening is reinforced and increased. Igniting passions serves as the catalyst for transitioning network members from finding and likening into mutual engagement.

Mutual Engagement

Mutual engagement facilitates creativity, challenge, experimentation and learning within fluctuating support networks. The intensity of mutual engagement can facilitate creative problem solving and innovation. Through mutual engagement, members build confidence, commitment and the energy to sustain network participation.

The Developmental Stages of Fluctuating Support Networks

Fluctuating support networks are epiphenomenal - self-emerging, self-organising, and self-sustaining. Networks exhibit five phases of development – *attracting, engaging, participating, fluctuating and sustaining.* These phases do not occur as a linear progression; rather, within the amorphous nature of fluctuating support networks, the emergence and existence of the various phases is serendipitous, sequential and simultaneous (Glaser, 1998, p.15). In other words, there are always network members engaged in each phase at any one time. The exception, of course, would be a network that has ceased to fluctuate and is unable to sustain itself.

Trust is the moderating factor. Perpetual bonds build and sustain trust. While network interactions fluctuate, established bonds and the sense of connectedness they generate remain once the amplifying causal loops of finding and likening and mutual engagement are in play. Bonding and connectedness persist over time and distance.

Variables influencing the fluctuating nature of fluctuating support networks include number and diversity of members, member needs and interests, availability of time, intensity and frequency of interaction. Variables influencing the sustainability of fluctuating support networks include level of bonding and trust among network members, membership diversity and maturity, geographic dispersion of members, philosophical alignment of core membership. Sustainability of fluctuating support networks is threatened by insularity, behaviours of conflict, control, opportunism and deception and possible co-optation by the formal organisation.

Implications for Management Practice

Findings of this study illustrate the potential dehumanising impact of organisational change on knowledge workers. In particular, this study emphasises the negative consequences of persistent and unpredictable change and the resultant erosion of psychological safety in the workplace. Fear of change increases resistance to further organisational change efforts. The impact is significant for both individual workers and for their organisations.

The dilemma for management is the dichotomy between desired outcomes of change management, such as innovation, strategic advantage and enhanced operational effectiveness, and the potential of dehumanising workplace environments to compromise organisational access to the tacit knowledge, wisdom and creativity resident within the workforce. Traditional responses through strategy and structure may well further compound the dichotomous divide between individual and organisational needs. Unfortunately, the outcome of such change efforts is frequently a further erosion of the psychological contract and an escalation of the dehumanisation that reinforces knowledge worker resistance to change, thus setting up the conditions for eventual organisational ossification.

The theory emergent of this study has the potential to influence the way managers in knowledge-based organisations perceive and value the participation of knowledge workers in fluctuating support networks. As an informal response to the formal organisation, fluctuating support networks deviate from the conventions of the formal organisation and provide network members with a venue for fulfilling unmet social and psychological work-related needs. This study contributes to management praxis by raising awareness and offering insights into the practical value of such networks and their power to rehumanise the knowledge workplace.

Knowledge and understanding of such networks may enable managers to understand their functionality in resolving knowledge workers' concerns and needs in response to persistent and unpredictable change and may offer managers an additional resource for achieving strategic organisational goals, especially those goals that require cross-functional integration and non-conventional perspectives to address increasingly complex organisational problems. Adopting the basic social process of rehumanising as a conceptual framework may assist managers and human resource professionals in developing organisational strategies that support a broader humanistic paradigm. Such perspective also highlights the value of the informal organisation, and fluctuating support networks in particular, as important psychological infrastructure for the knowledge workplace.

To elaborate further, this study also bears on several specific issues related to management praxis in knowledge-based organisations:

Job Security, Recruitment and Retention

Human resource managers indicate that they expect recruitment and retention to be the biggest workplace challenge over the next decade, ahead of compensation and opportunity for advancement (Galt, 2003). The rise of non-standard work arrangements has increased perceived job insecurity (Parker, 1994), leading to job dissatisfaction and lower organisational commitment which, in turn, can result in increased employee turnover (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1991). Such insecurity is exacerbated by a lack of information and by a sense of decisions being outside of individual workers' control (Polanyi, 2004). The lack of a secure employment relationship creates a sense of alienation and loss of meaning in the workplace.

Mobility and turnover in organisations may be moderated by secure anchorage in a primary group that supports the beliefs, feelings and ideas of members (Bennis, Berkowitz, Affinito, & Malone, 1968). Fluctuating support networks, particularly intra-organisational networks, may well serve as affinity groups offering a sense of belonging and security to organisational members.

Loyalty and Commitment

A requirement for sustaining any social system is a degree of loyalty by its members and any threat to the system enhances this requirement (Gouldner, 1968). While expertise is highly valued in knowledge work, it may come at a cost in terms of reduced loyalty to the organisation in favour of a "cosmopolitan" focus on career opportunities at large. In an effort to enhance internal stability, organisations may be inclined to place less emphasis on expertise and more on loyalty in times of uncertainty and environmental stress (Gouldner, 1968). Thus, knowledge workers who have highly sought after expertise and access to networks of interest, particularly via communications technologies, may feel less inclined to retain a local loyalty. This propensity may be enhanced by any increase in organisational conflict or uncertainty. The naturally cosmopolitan nature of highly specialised knowledge workers will promote their engagement in fluctuating support networks external to their organisations and thus potentially place them in positions of being recruited away. Organisations need to be cognisant of the potential to lose such highly skilled expertise, particularly if the organisation becomes too local in its focus and efforts to survive environmental threats. A suggested strategy is that of deepening the involvement of these highly skilled workers within the organisation to engender a sense of local loyalty (Glaser, 1968). This local loyalty does not have to embrace the organisation as a whole. Loyalty may exist at many levels.

Although trust has to do with the culture of the wider society, it is also greatly conditioned by social arrangements at the micro level (Belanger, 2000). As workers become disgruntled with their workplace, they seek new venues in which to build and restore trust. Their informal fluctuating support networks may compensate for a general cynicism and distrust of the formal organisation. This loyalty to a small work unit or an informal internal network may be sufficient to sustain commitment to the formal organisation. Thus, the existence of fluctuating support networks within the organisation may substantially support local loyalties, even in times of organisational threat or uncertainty.

Such membership is a way of reconceptualising the psychological contract between individuals and their organisations, as workers can hold "twin citizenship" within the organisation and within their smaller work units (Handy, 1994). Loyalty to smaller units fosters liberty, incentive and initiative, while loyalty to the organisation mitigates duplication, inefficiency and misunderstanding. This notion of twin citizenship can extend to the participation of knowledge workers in fluctuating support networks. Handy continues by articulating three senses that encompass the search for meaning in the modern workplace – a sense of continuity, a sense of belonging and a sense of direction (p.257-275). Rehumanising through fluctuating support networks offers knowledge workers a source of continuity and connection that many workers indicate they no longer experience in their organisations. Managers would be wise to leverage this subsidiary contribution while focusing organisational efforts on developing the third sense – that of direction or mission.

Employee Involvement and Productivity

Despite evidence of productivity and profit enhancement through more humanistic management approaches, many organisations fail to address this increasingly vital aspect of overall organisational performance.

The fundamental reason is that people have not changed their mindset…. the obsession of managers with mergers and acquisitions, downsizing and strategy prevents them from seeing the more sustainable gains from managing human capital. (London, 2003).

Employee involvement is crucial to knowledge organisations, as effort remains largely discretionary in knowledge work (Belanger, 2000). The concept of workplace democracy gives workers more autonomy and control over their work and their work environments (Semler, 1994, 2004). At the same time, however, it is worth noting that the move to greater involvement of non-managerial workers in the organisation and co-ordination of work may contribute to work intensification (Belanger, 2000). Fluctuating support networks can provide an avenue to enable a degree of self-organisation, autonomy and control for knowledge workers while also moderating potentially stressful impacts of work intensification.

Learning and Innovation

Fluctuating support networks can prepare the ground for learning in organisations by promoting co-operative peer group inquiry for both support and challenge (Reason, 1999). By building trustful relationships over time, networks enhance organisational learning (Floren & Tell, 2004). Members go beyond the superficial, giving each other their full attention and opening up to new learning through genuine "kindred" sharing. Social arrangements that are more conducive to trust and social capital will lead to further organisation innovation and economic growth (Belanger, 2000).

Stress and Satisfaction at Work

Workers in high-strain jobs have higher rates of disease than their counterparts in low-strain jobs. In fact, health care expenditures are nearly 50 per cent greater for workers who report high levels of stress. Stress can also result in increased absenteeism and decline in productivity (Williams, 2003). Organisations that demand next to nothing of individuals can alienate and repress creative ability; but organisations that demand everything of individuals destroy autonomy and particularity with questionable demands made on the individual's time, psychic stability and social development (Leitche & van Hattem, 2000).

… most often the sources of disengagement from a job don't involve salary and benefits, but things that managers do have control over, such as providing challenge, meaningful work and opportunities to learn and gain recognition. (Immen, 2004)

Thus, rehumanising through fluctuating support networks holds both healing and revitalising potential for knowledge workers. Participation enables knowledge workers to better manage the stressful impact of a dehumanised workplace environment, establish supportive relationships and re-ignite their passion and energy for work. The residual benefit to the formal organisation of this participation should serve as sufficient incentive for any manager to develop an understanding of the significant role and value that fluctuating support networks offer for rehumanising knowledge work.

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