CHAPTER – II

KNOWLEDGE WORKER CHARACTERISTICS AND KNOWLEDGE WORKER PRODUCTIVITY DETERMINANTS

2.1 Introduction

Knowledge Workers include professionals, scientists, educators, and information system designers. Knowledge work is characterized by the use of information, by unique work situations, and by creativity and autonomy. Knowledge workers make decisions rather than physical items and work with ideas rather than with objects. Their work focuses on mental rather than muscle power and is characterized by non-repetitive tasks. Knowledge workers use different methods and techniques to solve problems and have the authority to decide what work methods to use in order to complete their varying job tasks.

2.2 Knowledge Worker Characteristics

As discussed by Mr. William W. Prince in Encyclopedia of Management (enotes.com), Knowledge work is complex, and those who perform it, require certain skills and abilities as well as familiarity with actual and theoretical knowledge (Knowledge Workers Forum 2006). These persons must be able to find, access, recall, and apply information, interact well with others, and possess the ability and motivation to acquire and improve these skills. While the importance of one or more of these characteristics may vary from one job to the next, all knowledge workers need the following characteristics:

(i) Possessing factual and theoretical knowledge,
(ii) Finding and accessing information,
(iii) Ability to apply information,
(iv) Communication skills,
(v) Motivation and
(vi) Intellectual capabilities.

2.2.1 Possessing Factual and Theoretical Knowledge

Knowledge workers are conversant with specific factual and theoretical information. School teachers possess information regarding specialized subject matter, teaching strategies, and learning theories. The sales representative commands factual knowledge concerning the product he or she sells and theoretical knowledge about how to interest customers in that product. Prospective knowledge workers may need years of formal education to master the information needed to enter a particular field of work. Because knowledge is always being created, this type of employee will be acquiring additional information on a continual basis.

2.2.2 Finding and Accessing Information

At a time when the operations of today's information society depends on knowledge that is continually growing and changing, distribution of information within organizations has become problematic due to the massive amount of information with which employees need to
be familiar. Knowledge workers must therefore know how to independently identify and find such material. Such employees need to know which sources provide the information they need and how to use these sources in order to locate information successfully.

2.2.3 Ability to Apply Information

Knowledge workers use information to answer questions, solve problems, complete writing assignments, and generate ideas. Use of analogical reasoning and relevance judgment enables employees to address successfully personal and customer service-related issues. Analogical reasoning is a knowledge-based problem-solving process in which persons apply information from precedents to new situations. Relevance judgment is the process by which individuals decide whether or not a precedent is applicable to the problem at hand. The non-repetitive nature of knowledge workers' jobs makes crucial the ability to apply information to new situations.

2.2.4 Communication Skills

Knowledge work is characterized by close contact with customers, supervisors, subordinates, and team mates. Successful knowledge workers present clearly, in spoken and written word, both factual and theoretical information. These employees listen with understanding and ask for clarification when they do not understand what is being said to them.

Knowledge workers must be able to speak, read, write, and listen in one-on-one and group settings. Emphasis on quality customer service and customization of goods and services to meet individual customer needs and wants brings knowledge workers into close contact with customers. The goals of organizational effectiveness and continual improvement of products, together with the need to continually consider new information in order to accomplish work, require communication between supervisor and supervised and among team mates or colleagues. Knowledge workers possess communications skills that enable them to collaborate with one another for goal-setting, decision-making, and idea generating purposes.

2.2.5 Motivation

The nature of knowledge work requires continual growth, in terms of mastery of information and skill development, on the part of those who do this type of work. Knowledge workers must become and remain interested in finding information, memorizing that information, and applying it to their work. Because new technological developments call on knowledge workers to change continuously the way they accomplish their work, these individuals must maintain a desire to apply their talents toward incorporating new information and new technologies into their work.

2.2.6 Intellectual Capabilities

Knowledge workers must have the intellectual capabilities to acquire the skills discussed above. Such intellectual capacities include those concerned with the understanding, recall, processing and application of specialized information. Persons who perform knowledge work must possess the abilities needed to acquire appropriate communication skills and to learn how to figure out where and how information can be located. Knowledge workers are able to learn how to read and write at post secondary levels and to perform abstract reasoning. They also have the intellectual capacity to understand the value of acquiring and maintaining the knowledge and skills needed to accomplish their work.
2.3 Knowledge Worker Productivity Determinants

Drucker (1999) identifies following five factors that determine the productivity of knowledge workers which are in direct contrast with manual and other process orientated forms of work and that are important to consider when redesigning work and organisational practices:

- For knowledge workers the focus is on what is the task, rather than how should the work be done? And following this up by concentrating on the task and eliminating everything that hampers the worker from doing the task.

- It will be crucial to eliminate non-value adding aspects of knowledge work, such as, waiting for the arrival of inputs, getting clarification about ambiguous goals or information, redoing work in response to changes in constraints or context and to account for the impacts of untimely re-prioritisation and re-identification of outcomes.

- The responsibility for productivity is imposed on the knowledge worker themselves i.e. knowledge workers manage their own productivity and have autonomy for their performance.

- Ensuring continuing innovation and continuous learning and teaching are part of the task and are the responsibility of the knowledge worker.

- Productivity of knowledge workers is primarily about quality of output and quantity second.

Drucker concludes that the key determinants of knowledge worker productivity are management and organisational practices, information technology and workplace design. Technology can always be purchased, but it is not the determinant factor in productivity. The values that people have such as honesty, hard work, integrity, teamwork, and resilience affect productivity. For example at the height of their economic boom, the Japanese were known not necessarily for their motor skills but for their attitude to work, work ethic, respect for authority and loyalty.