



Empowering the knowledge worker



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 by [Marc Buyens](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
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More innovation is the remedy of the last resort that will save Europe's economic position and welfare. At least, that's what they say. As a result, European corporations are frantically looking for ways to improve the productivity of their knowledge workers, assuming this will increase their innovation ability. Are they looking in the right direction?

Things are not going too well for Europe. Growth perspectives are limited or even non-existent, traditional strongholds are vanquished and today, there is little hope for a rapid turnaround. Europe has to change and has to do this rapidly.

Fortunately, we already know the solution and this solution even has a name: more innovation. More innovation is the thing that will make that Europe will rise again from its ashes like the legendary phoenix. Governmental bodies, business associations, the academic world and of course, the consultants are all preaching the innovation word.

Sleeping with the enemy

Unfortunately, we Europeans are not the only ones on this path towards more innovation.

A couple of weeks ago, I received an invitation for a congress in London, titled "Delivering Effective Innovation". It was one of the many initiatives that we have seen recently attempting to increase the innovation awareness of European organisations.

Strangely enough (or not?), one of the main sponsors of the event was a consulting firm from Bangalore, India, [Erehwon Innovation Consulting Pvt Ltd](#). Perhaps the war is already over before it began?

It is only one small example. We Europeans must be aware of the reality that we are not the only ones preaching the innovation theme. Also the other economies view this as a path for future growth and a stronger market position.

Therefore, the innovation idea itself will not make or break the success of Europe or its organisations. As always, it will be the way organisations will develop and implement this concept that will determine their success. And as usual, there are more ways to fail than to succeed.

The productivity of knowledge workers

In our quest for more innovation, the knowledge workers are in the eye of the storm. They

represent the intellectual capital that will make the future success of organisations. They will generate the creative ideas.

Whether this is a correct expectation is unclear to me. Nevertheless, reality is that an increasing number of organisations are more closely watching the activities of their knowledge workers.

However, doing so, they face a particular challenge. Indeed, the very nature of the work of knowledge workers makes that most of this is rather "invisible", hence it cannot be measured. So how can you assess the productivity of their work and activities?

Fortunately, there always is technology.

Empowering the knowledge worker

Communication is an absolute necessity for knowledge workers. Therefore, most of them make ample use of modern communication technologies such as e-mail, laptops, GSM, PDA, etc.

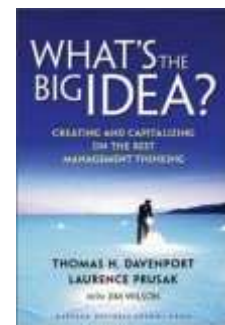
All the use of this technology has one major advantage: this usage can be tracked, timed and measured, hence be a candidate for improvement.

This observation has been the basis for a productivity improvement idea raised by T. Davenport, published in the [Harvard Business Review](#) of February 2005 in the list of so-called "Breakthrough ideas for 2005".

According to Davenport, activities that rely on the use of such modern technology represent some 40% of the total working time of the average knowledge worker. However, only a minority of these knowledge workers is able to use this technology in the most appropriate way. Ample room for a productivity improvement, assuming the right training and coaching are provided.

I assume Davenport's figures and statements are correct. The situation might be slightly different over here in Europe, but most of us have seen similar behaviour patterns over here. In addition, based upon my own observations, I can confirm that most employees are not really skilled in the productive use of such technology. Therefore, Davenport's assumption of a potential for improvement is correct.

Still, I am wondering whether we should call this a "breakthrough idea". Is this really the most important challenge we must face improving the productivity of our knowledge workers? What is the added value of the "communication power user"? Is productivity really an enabler for innovation?



What's the Big Idea?
Creating and Capitalizing
on the Best
Management Thinking
Thomas H. Davenport,
Laurence Prusak, H.
James Wilson

Pareto and the emotional knowledge worker

I think Davenport's idea is a valid one, but it is also a "jump to conclusions".

While trying to improve the productivity of knowledge workers, we must first focus on the actions that cause this 40% time consumption. Thereby, it is less important to determine whether these actions are performed efficiently or not. The first question we must ask is whether these actions are really needed.

In many cases, we will find that many of these actions are needed or mandatory given the existing organisational structure, the procedures, the culture... However, in most cases, they add little value to the work of the knowledge worker or of the performance of the organisation as a whole.

Therefore, our first step must be to eliminate the inefficiencies that are outside the control of the knowledge worker, yet influence his working context in a negative way.

Once we have done that, we can proceed with productivity improvement approaches such as the one suggested by Davenport. Only focusing on the latter is likely to result in streamlined uselessness.

Also, while trying to improve the skill level of knowledge workers in the use of this technology, do keep Pareto's law in mind. Do not go for perfection. Do accept that some level of inefficiency remains. It is better so. Perfectionism kills creativity.

On the other hand, it might be worthwhile to correctly assess the added value of an ongoing investment in the latest communication technologies. In many cases, you will find that there is no incremental value, often even a negative one.

I also know a colleague who is aiming for the ultimate technological solution, the perfect integration and synchronisation of address- and phonebook information on the laptop, the home PC, the GSM, the PDA, etc.

Of course, he is a complete technological moron that always has to rely on the help of colleagues and subordinates to get things working. For a while. Taking into account the investment in wasted time and the questionable productivity improvement, none of his "productivity investments" will ever make it to break-even.

Is this knowledge worker productive? I assume you all have the answer for yourself. Still, I must admit that he is very happy with his toys. Happiness is an enabler for creativity and innovation. At least, that's what they say...


Have fun!

About the author




Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

 LinkedIn profile: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>

 Follow on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

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Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com

 RSS feed: <http://www.xpragma.com/english/rss/xpven.xml>