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Mats Alvesson

ABSTRACT

This article takes a sceptical view of the functionalist understanding of the nature and significance of 'knowledge' in so-called knowledge-intensive companies. The article emphasizes the slipperiness of the concept of knowledge, the ambiguity of knowledge, its role in what is constructed as knowledge work and the evaluation of work outcomes. Given this ambiguity, the management of rhetoric, image and social processes appears crucial in organizations of this kind. Difficulties in demonstrating competence and performance – as well as the significance of producing the right impression – make work identity difficult to secure. However, this is a key element in doing knowledge work. Successful rhetoric, image production and orchestration of social interactions call for the regulation of employee identities.

KEYWORDS

ambiguity ■ identity ■ knowledge-intensive companies ■ professional services ■ rhetoric

On knowledge-intensive companies

The category of knowledge-intensive companies (Alvesson, 1995; *Journal of Management Studies*, 1993; Robertson & Swan, 1998; Starbuck, 1992) refers to firms where most work is said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the work force. The company claims to produce qualified products and/or services.

Typical examples of companies in this category are law and accounting

firms, management, engineering and computer consultancy companies, advertising agencies, R & D units and high-tech companies. The category of knowledge-intensive organization overlaps with, and includes, the notion of a professional organization. It is broader and does not emphasize the features ascribed to a typical profession, such as a code of ethics, standardized education and criteria for certification, a strong professional association, monopolization of a particular labour market through the regulation of entry, etc. Professional organizations tend to be characterized by the relative homogeneity of the profession; its (claimed) common knowledge base and its significance for the identities of professionals typically reduce variation between organizations, while other knowledge-intensive organizations may have a more organizationally specific knowledge base and be more idiosyncratic (Morris & Empson, 1998; Robertson et al., 1999).

The idea of knowledge-intensive companies and related concepts such as knowledge work is problematic. It is difficult to substantiate knowledge-intensive companies and knowledge workers as distinct, uniform categories. The distinction between these and non- (or less) knowledge-intensive organization/non-knowledge workers is not self-evident, as all organizations and work involve 'knowledge' and any evaluation of 'intensiveness' is likely to be contestable. Nevertheless, in many crucial respects, there are differences between many professional service and high-tech companies on the one hand, and more routinized service and industry companies on the other, e.g. in terms of broadly socially shared ideas about the significance of a long theoretical education and intellectual capacities for the work. It makes sense to refer to knowledge-intensive companies as a vague but meaningful category, with sufficient heuristic value to be useful. The category does not lend itself to precise definition or delimitation and it includes organizations which are neither unitary nor unique. Perhaps *the claim to knowledge-intensiveness* is one of the most distinguishing features. The emphasis of knowledge can be seen as a matter of legitimation as much as mirroring what knowledge-intensive organizations and workers actually do. De-emphasizing knowledge work as the skilful application of cognitive rationality based on superior knowledge provides a point of departure radically different from mainstream thinking.

This article critically addresses the significance of knowledge and suggests other candidates for capturing what is really crucial in knowledge-intensive companies. This means a new theoretical framework for thinking about knowledge and knowledge work. Central to this framework are three kinds of ambiguity: (a) of knowledge; (b) of the significance of knowledge; and (c) of results claimed to be contingent upon knowledge work. The article explores the consequences of ambiguity for management, client relations,

organization and identity. It is argued that the regulation of identity is crucial to cope with the strains of – and exploit the possibilities associated with – the indeterminacies in this kind of work and organization.¹

Problematizing knowledge: Questioning functionalism

Knowledge – at least in the context of the business world and of management studies – is normally treated as a functional resource, representing a ‘truth’ or at least something instrumentally useful on a subject matter and/or a set of principles or techniques for dealing with material or social phenomena.

In the literature, distinctions between different forms of knowledge are proposed (e.g. Blackler, 1995; Nonaka, 1994; Scarborough, 1995; Spender, 1996), typically based on a combination of two dimensions producing a four-fielder. It is common to distinguish between tacit and explicit knowledge, individual and social, ideational and materialized, etc. These distinctions are seldom unproblematic:

Knowledge is a slippery and elusive concept, and every discipline has its own secret realization of it. Problems of interpretation haunt every attempt to use the concept effectively, such as that even basic typologies that talk about, say, formal versus tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967) actually can be quite meaningless in certain contexts.

(Scarborough & Burrell, 1996: 178)

Many authors acknowledge that knowledge is very difficult to define but treat it nevertheless as a valuable capacity which can bring about good results. A key characteristic for knowledge-intensive organizations is said to be the capacity to solve complex problems through creative and innovative solutions (e.g. Hedberg, 1990; Sveiby & Risling, 1986). Thus, a knowledge-intensive organization is a firm that can produce exceptionally good results with the help of outstanding expertise. Starbuck (1992) suggests, for example, that ‘to make the kif [knowledge-intensive firm] a useful category, one has to require that exceptional expertise makes important contributions’ (p. 716). But these contributions are a matter of interpretation and beliefs; expectations and symbolism are also important. Expertise is not just valuable for its technical functions and ‘objective results’, it also symbolizes rationality, wisdom, intelligence etc. Through symbolizing these virtues, the impression is communicated that something rational, sensible and valuable is being accomplished. However, knowledge often creates problems through

imprinting a norm of how things should be and indicating a gap between current imperfections and the ideal. This is frequently the situation exploited by, for example, management consultants (Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997) and other people merchandising new panaceas for business practice.

Against objectivistic and reified understandings of knowledge, one can point to the uncertainties and controversies characterizing much of science (Brante, 1988) as well as the limitations of the rationality of people working with science and science-like forms of knowledge (Fores et al., 1991). Few knowledge-workers in business operate according to a handbook of scientific methodology, making knowledge work or esoteric expertise in practice different from the application of superior cognitive rationality.

In addition to such counterpoints to the robust, functionalist view of knowledge, one can argue (a) that it is extremely difficult to isolate and point to knowledge as a particular factor that is in itself important, and (b) that the success of knowledge-intensive work is more contingent upon rather loose *beliefs* about them being able to offer something specific to clients and customers. Against an objectivistic and functionalist understanding of knowledge and knowledge-intensity, social constructivism (Knorr-Cetina, 1994; Steier, 1991) and institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1987) offer valuable insights.

Knowledge as a limited element in the work of 'knowledge-workers'

Besides emphasizing the ambiguity of knowledge and its development and application, one may also question its centrality in much work on organizations and professions addressed in this article. In a study of the work of psychologists and architects, Svensson (1990) found a discrepancy between the rational model of knowledge and the uncertainty, complexity, instability and uniqueness that characterize their day-to-day work. Theoretical knowledge plays a marginal part in their work.

In a case study of a computer consultancy firm it was found that managers and employees often downplayed the role of technical expertise in their work (Alvesson, 1995). The work tasks varied considerably and often people were assigned to jobs for which they had very little formal education or relevant experience. Of course, this capacity to adapt to various contexts and tasks is an important part of consultants' skills, but it is a bit different from the application of a specialized set of knowledge. To say that the work of professionals and other knowledge-intensive organizations and workers is only – or even mainly – the direct or 'creative' application of a systematic,

institutionalized body of formal knowledge or esoteric expertise may be misleading. Knowledge – in the sense of a body of information, theories, methodologies broadly considered to have passed some tests of validity, being institutionally backed up, calling for a high level of cognitive ability and being broadly shared by members of a profession or organization claimed to be based on a specific type of knowledge – is thus *not* necessarily that significant in work.

Also, from a slightly different angle, the claimed significance of the knowledge and talents of the employees in at least some large-scale knowledge-intensive companies can be questioned in organizations offering relatively standardized services. In some professional service companies, for example, the quality of service is mainly contingent upon the company's ability to organize and run large, long-term projects, implying the coordination of a great number of personnel trained in the company's method of being able to put people to work quickly (Maister, 1993). Individuals are placed in work groups and allocated well-delimited and specified tasks. The possibilities for making use of special talents or esoteric forms of expertise are thus restricted (Bergström 1998). Of course, this would be contingent upon management ability (including knowledge), but the significance of sophisticated knowledge seems to be limited in most of the activities involved.

To conclude, the extent to which knowledge is a particularly significant element in the functions of knowledge-intensive companies remains an open question. It is frequently impossible to separate knowledge and 'pure' intellectual skills (symbolist–analytical work) from flexibility, organizing capacity, a high level of motivation, social skills, less esoteric technical skills, the ability to follow company methods, standardized ways of operating and other elements in knowledge-intensive companies.

The ambiguities of work evaluation

A third form of ambiguity concerns the results produced. Persistent uncertainty is by definition a part of the area in which most professionals and other knowledge workers are operating. Fields of action with low uncertainty, or where the knowledge required to evaluate problems and solutions is easily accessible, do not provide the space necessary for the development of socially recognized expertise (Beckman, 1989). This means that professional work is also very difficult to evaluate, at least for those outside the sphere of the experts concerned. In practice, such expert evaluations rarely take place.

In much professional work, the criteria for evaluating work are unreliable or entirely absent. Comparisons of the decisions of expert and novice

auditors indicate no relationship between the degree of expertise (as indicated by experience) and consensus; in high-risk and less standard situations, the experts' consensus level was lower than that of novices (Bédard & Chi, 1993). Mozier (1992) remarks that 'judging the quality of an audit is an extremely problematic exercise' and says that consumers of the audit service 'have only a very limited insight into the quality of work undertaken by an audit firm' (p. 2). It is also claimed that in these firms there is a high premium on the idiosyncratic knowledge of the client, and great difficulty in monitoring performance and developing clear performance contracts (Fichman & Leventhal, 1991). In the advertising profession, representatives of clients and the advertising agency very often have different evaluations of a particular proposal for an advertisement (Alvesson & Köping, 1993). Evaluation of the work of computer consultants is often the object of uncertainty and 'agreement on problem definitions and solutions requires active communication and negotiation' (Deetz, 1997: 156). A study of the construction of the Channel Tunnel, found that the perceived role and significance of engineering consultants diverged considerably between the consultants themselves and the permanent staff (Henriksson, 1999). While the consultants 'frequently put across the notion of being the committed rescuers who salvaged the project from complete failure' (p. 145), many of the people they said they were helping frequently blamed them for 'having done more harm than good' (p. 146).

Some knowledge-intensive companies standardize their products; for example, in management consultancy it is increasingly common for companies to develop methodologies for systematic work (Werr et al., 1997). However, the idiosyncrasies of clients and the considerable amount of interaction between consultants and their clients in the production process, adds to task uncertainty and to the difficulties of evaluating quality of results and the performance of knowledge-intensive companies.

Due to the difficulties of evaluating the performances of many knowledge-intensive forms of work and the close interaction between consultant and client, market control can often be expected to be relatively ineffective:

Because of the esoteric body of knowledge, as well as the intrinsic opacity of agent behavior and indeterminacy of outcome, however, analogous market control mechanisms are either ineffective or not at all present in the principal–professional context.

(Sharma, 1997: 780)

This implies that the rationality of the market is not sufficient to counteract ambiguity.

In many cases, the idea that there is a very strong and causal relation

between knowledge and problem-solving appears simplistic as results are often almost impossible for the non-expert to evaluate – something that is equally difficult for the expert. How can anyone tell whether a headhunting firm has found and recruited the most suitable candidates, or if an audit has been carried out to the highest standards? Of course, sometimes one may observe whether something works or not (e.g. after the intervention of a plumber), but normally the issues concerned are not that simple in the context in which the concept of knowledge-intensiveness is frequently used. Here we are mainly dealing with complex and intangible phenomena. Even if something seems to work, it might have worked even better or the cost of the intervention might have been much lower if another professional or organization had carried out the task.

It thus can be argued that the distinctiveness of knowledge-intensive firms lies in the ambiguities characterizing (a) their claimed core product/service (knowledge); (b) what they are doing (working with 'knowledge' compared to behaving in ways that are loosely connected to this quality); and (c) the results of their work. A deep and persistent interest in ambiguity uncertainty that cannot be solved through information or expertise offers a strong counterpoint to a conventional approach proceeding from an idea of cognitive rationality as the 'essence' of knowledge-intensive work and organizations. Saying this is not contradictory to acknowledging that ambiguity exists – or is a possible theme for interpretation – in all organizational life (Feldman & March, 1981; Jackall, 1988; Martin & Meyerson, 1988). Focusing on ambiguity may, however, be particularly fruitful in the study of knowledge-intensive organizations.

Emphasizing ambiguity as a general feature of not only knowledge but also what characterizes contemporary societies and organizations in general, encourages an alternative understanding of why experts are frequently used, compared to what functionalists claim. Rather than being employed for their problem-solving capacity, they may be used because institutionalized 'truths' (myths) say that one should do so (see Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Experts imply legitimacy. In the context of uncertainty, the enrolment of consultants may also make the avoidance of responsibility easier if and when 'blame-time' occurs. As Jackall (1988) points out, managers want to avoid making (difficult) decisions and are inclined to involve many people in the decision-making process in order to distribute the blame if the decision appears to be wrong in retrospect. Having consultants and other experts involved is one possibility here.

There are thus good reasons to explore other dimensions than those assuming that knowledge and organizations based on esoteric expertise (symbolic-analytical skills, expert knowledge) express cognitive rationality and

accomplish valuable results. Ways of dealing with ambiguity provide themes for understanding the nature and management of knowledge-intensive organizations.

Image intensity

The ambiguity of knowledge and the work of knowledge-intensive companies means that 'knowledge', 'expertise' and 'solving problems' to a large degree become matters of beliefs, impressions and negotiations of meaning. Institutionalized assumptions, expectations, reputation, images, etc. feature strongly in the perception of the products of knowledge-intensive organizations and workers. In the absence of the existence of tangible qualities available for inspection, it is extremely important for those claiming to be knowledge-intensive to nurture an image of being so. Image becomes vital as a substitute for the ambiguities of the content of the skills and knowledge of the personnel, for the difficulties in finding out what knowledge people actually do and for evaluating the results (Alvesson, 1990). This image must be managed on different levels: professional-industrial, corporate and individual. Image may be targeted in specific acts and arrangements, in visible symbols for public consumption but also in everyday behaviour, within the organization and in interaction with others. Thus image is not just of importance in marketing and for attracting personnel but also during and after production. Size and a big name are therefore important for many knowledge-intensive companies – and here we perhaps have a major explanation for all the mergers and acquisitions in accounting, management consultancy and other professional service companies. A large size is reassuring. A well-known brand name substitutes for difficulties in establishing quality.

The significance of image also affects the discipline of the workforce at the individual level. In a study of a Big Six accounting firm Covaleski et al. (1998) found that the appearance of being 'professional' was highly significant for the career prospects of the accountants. One person, identified by his superiors as a 'revenue stream', reported that his success was closely associated with mimicking the behaviour of his mentor and his mentor's mentor, both of whom were partners. There was a strong focus on physical appearance – to give a strong impression of being tightly disciplined and accountant-like. Virtues such as appearing clean, proper, impersonal, objective, standardized, predictable and reliable are, presumably, communicated. A study of Swedish advertising workers indicated much effort in presenting the right appearance, of fashion-conscious, casual but elegant clothes, frequent changes of dress, etc. (Alvesson & K  ping, 1993).

Rhetoric intensity

In view of the notoriously ambiguous character of (a significant part of) knowledge-intensive workers and organizations, the demands on the agents involved in terms of providing convincing accounts of what they do, and what sort of people they are, become central. This means that rhetorical skills and rhetorical acts become highly significant for the constitution of the company, its workers, activities and external relations.

There are good reasons to resist a clear-cut objectivist or realist dualism between rhetoric, ideology, symbols and other 'non-real' elements, on the one hand, and the real, the true, substance and other 'non-invented' elements on the other hand. However, a strong rhetorical, relativist, symbolist, post-modernist or subjectivist thesis in which all distinctions between reality and appearance are viewed as fiction is unsatisfying. I am certainly not denying that we sometimes can sort out the real from the fabricated (the Holocaust was not a fiction, the knowledge behind and invested in the use of penicillin by authorized medicine seems to have been strongly validated). Most interesting research questions for social science do not, however, fit into such a pattern of thinking. The 'constructedness' of reality and the reality of construction, the realness of symbols and the symbolic character of reality should be borne in mind (Peters & Rothenbuhler, 1989). Especially, perhaps, when the knowledge-intensive is studied.

Rhetoric, then, is not just external to the core of knowledge-intensive, but is in a way its core. Rhetoric does not simply mean persuasive talk being in some kind of opposition to 'reality' or 'truth', but refers to elements of argument and persuasion which may, or may not, be backed up by 'facts'. Seldom can these be separated from a rhetoric aiming to convince sceptics that a particular claim simply is based on, or reports, 'facts'. Even scientific reports are rhetorical products (Watson, 1995). An aspect that differentiates many knowledge-intensive companies from other kinds of companies is thus the degree of elaboration of the language through which one describes oneself and one's organization, regulates client orientations and engages in identity work (Alvesson, 1993, 1994). Comparatively 'non-ambiguous' organizations (relating to elements of products and a great deal of operations and many employees' work content), such as fast food, railways and nail manufacturers, and occupations such as typists and machine operators, can be managed without highly developed rhetorical skills. Organizations and jobs that score high on ambiguity – such as the ones we are addressing here – cannot be managed without skills in, and attention to, rhetoric. This is perhaps most salient for management consultants described by Czarniawska-Joerges (1988) as merchants of meaning trading in words.

A strict separation between having knowledge and marketing it is misleading. Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum as something fixed and packaged, ready to be sold and distributed. This implies a change of focus from an emphasis on formal knowledge to persuasive strategies of convincing all concerned about the expertise and superior rationality one is governed by, and which can benefit the clients.

Social connections and interaction-intensity

As a socially constructed phenomenon, knowledge does not exist on its own, but is dependent on social recognition; without being perceived and recognized by others, for all practical matters, knowledge does not appear as such – except for Robinson Crusoe and people in similar situations. A company that claims to be in the knowledge business – and to offer services or products with a sophisticated knowledge content – calls for the specific or institutionalized confirmation and support of significant others.

The rather heterogeneous aspect of the dependence on significant others for validation – the relational character of knowledge intensiveness – involves (a) (being perceived as) having links with bodies that confirm one's knowledge intensiveness; (b) forming and maintaining specific ties with clients and customers; and (c) orchestrating the interactions around carrying out the work in socially and politically fine-tuned ways.

Social links with others known for knowledge-intensiveness

The relational–interactional issues are relevant on different levels. Professionals get their recognition from professional bodies and authorization. As a layman, one 'knows' that a person is knowledgeable because credible institutions have declared that such is the case. An expert belongs to a community of experts: authorization and membership of associations are often the criteria for expertise. For members of so-called professions this is, of course, necessary and is formally regulated. Within the professions, the criteria and rules for evaluations are determined by the professionals themselves (Jamous & Peloille, 1970). Even though other knowledge-intensive occupations, weaker on formal professionalization, have developed less of an aura of mystique and more vulnerability to critical evaluations and opinions of outsiders, they are still strongly dependent on other insiders' recognition. Outsiders rely on the insiders to determine what is rational and valuable. For most knowledge-intensive companies other kinds of relationships and indications of inclusion than professional associations become more vital. For

companies claiming to be knowledge-intensive it is very important to have (be broadly perceived as having) the right – advanced and demanding – clients, joint partners and other organizations in the network. This is sometimes seen as important because it facilitates the development of new or better knowledge (Wikström et al., 1993). My point is that it is important also because it is typically read as confirming the claim of the focal company's knowledge-intensiveness. As Håkansson and Snehota (1989) suggest, the invisible assets of companies 'consisting largely of knowledge and abilities, fame and reputation, are mainly created in external relationships. Furthermore they cannot be separated from these relationships' (p.193). Knowledge – as a social construction – is maintained, developed and communicated through such interactions and the best way of indicating that a knowledge-intensive company deserves this label is to point at prestigious customers or partners, well known for *their* knowledge. A consultancy firm refers to having the 'right' client, and the client refers to using the 'right' consultants. Through such mutual confirmations, internal and external audiences 'know' that advanced knowledge is there. The symbolic function of networks is thus significant.

Developing and maintaining social relationships

Partly for this reason, but also of course in order to capture and keep customers, managing social relationships is important. It is just as crucial for knowledge-intensive service firms. Auditing firms typically make investments in relationships with clients and make efforts to generate social attachment (Fichman & Leventhal, 1991). In the absence of the availability of competition parameters such as price (which tends to be less significant for knowledge-intensive business) and quality (which is hard to evaluate), personal relationships and ambiguity reduction through personal contact take on extra significance. In knowledge-intensive contexts, the high level of uncertainty makes actors inclined to stick with the actors they know well.

For knowledge-intensive organizations, especially in the service sector, relations and 'relations knowledge' become very significant. Covaleski et al. (1998) refer to one employee in an accounting firm who observed that his 'emerging identity of being "chargeable" was less associated with possessing expertise and wielding knowledge than with managing business relations with clients' (p. 317). In another study of a Big Six accounting firm, Grey (1994) reports pressure for those aspiring to be partners to exploit their private life in order to develop and maintain business contacts.

Familiarity and personal experience do not guarantee the capacity to clearly evaluate the competence and contributions of a knowledge-intensive

company, but knowing the company and its personnel is one way of reducing the uncertainty experienced by the client. Clients of knowledge-intensive companies are often inclined to stay with the companies of which they have experience; dealing with unknown companies would only aggravate their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Consequently, investment in, and maintenance of, an established relationship become crucial.

Orchestrating interaction process

Partly, but perhaps loosely, connected to the forming of social bonds is the significance of the management of interaction processes as a cornerstone of carrying out knowledge-intensive work. Here marketing becomes central. In the absence of something very specific to offer or tangible results that can be inspected, the way the social process runs comes to represent how the work is done. According to Clark (1995) 'a key objective for consultants is to manage and manipulate the interaction process in such a way that they convince clients of their value' (p. 53).

According to the computer consultants that I studied, technical aspects were less crucial for the success of projects than the social relations within project groups and in relationship to clients: getting along, clarifying expectations and obtaining acceptance for solutions were critical (Alvesson, 1995). According to a group of advertising professionals, relationships with clients were also difficult to handle. To develop a good proposal was sometimes easier than getting the client to accept it, they said (Alvesson & Köping, 1993). Often knowledge-intensive service work is carried out in a political context and the service provider is expected to be prepared to provide political support, including letting the client take the credit for any perceived good result and accepting that any blame is ascribed to the service provider (Fincham, 1999; Jackall, 1988).

Of course, managing the client relationship is to some extent a part of a professional-functional concept of knowledge, including the development of a shared understanding of what the problem is, as well as gaining acceptance for the proposed solution; working with implementation issues calls for good social interaction and knowledge involving social skills. The interaction aspects pointed to here, however, go beyond this kind of professional-functional knowledge and include keeping the client on the hook, keeping him or her happy (more than serving the client organization as a whole), acting in a politically sensitive way, preserving an image of knowledge-intensive work being carried out and of using all kinds of methods to secure a personal relationship, where the demonstration of strongly justified superior excellence seldom can be accomplished.

Consequently, the management and manipulation of social relations and belonging to the right association or informal network of knowledge-intensive players are vital elements in demonstrating one's capacity in the absence of clear-cut and solid proof. The orchestration of social processes in an image-sensitive and politically sensitive way is important to compensate for the intangible, ambiguous character of the service being offered. Social relations and personal knowledge sometimes matter as much as or more than market transactions and quality/price-based competition.

Knowledge work and the matter of substance: The contingency of ambiguity, impressions and image?

It is reasonable to ask whether there is any variation in the centrality of ambiguity within the overall category of knowledge-intensive companies and occupations. Perhaps some of these companies may bother less about the environment's perceptions of their knowledge-intensiveness and choose instead to rely on their results to speak more or less for themselves. Social scientists typically disagree with the latter and emphasize the socially constructed nature of even the most sophisticated experiment-based science (Knorr-Cetina, 1994). Even here, the negotiation of meaning and social construction of the truth characterize knowledge.

Nevertheless, one may consider the possibility that there is strong variation among knowledge-intensive sectors in terms of possibilities of demonstrating knowledge and/or accomplishing a high level of consensus amongst stakeholders about problem-solving capacity. Perhaps professional service work, then, is more ambiguous and dependent on rhetoric than high-tech work, which results in a product that lends itself better to inspection. Those engaged in 'internal activities' (i.e. who do not regularly face clients/customers) may not directly bother about appearances, etc. as affecting how the environment perceives the product. Market/environment-oriented rhetorical and image work may to some extent be centralized and much activity carried out 'internally', protected from the gaze of the customers in high-tech companies offering a physical product. On the other hand, the knowledge-intensive work of professionals, groups and units within such companies are not easy to detect through inspecting the qualities of an end-product, which may take several years to develop and produce and where specific strengths and weaknesses – themselves an outcome of social judgement processes – may be difficult to ascribe to particular workers or units. More or less relevant or reliable indicators of – surrogates for – knowledge qualities become central to the constructions of the knowledge-intensiveness at stake. Rhetoric, image

manipulation and coping with social relations thus also become significant in an internal organizational context. In addition, tangible products do not speak for themselves: the value of pharmaceutical products, IT systems and other material outcomes is also dependent on persuasive tactics and the fabrication of a favourable social context.

It is thus not self-evident whether some knowledge work or organizations may be much less well understood through emphasizing ambiguity, rhetoric, image and interaction than others. The question 'Does it work (well) or not?' may, however, cause disagreement amongst experts to varying degrees and the demonstration of technical competence may be more or less important. Also within a specific professional service organization there may be considerable variation in this respect. Based on a study of a large accounting firm, Grey (1998) talks of a 'technical-behavioural' spectrum. In some areas, such as tax work, considerable command of technical issues was required, while in other areas, like insolvency, behavioural-symbolic issues were much more central.

Arguably, knowledge-intensive companies and their work, while typically dealing with complex, mainly intangible phenomena, are generally well conceptualized through the key concepts and framework linking these examples presented here. This should, however, be balanced against the insight that the category of the knowledge-intensive company is neither unitary nor unique. A sensitivity to variation within this rather broad category is important, and an openness for the productivity of other vocabularies and dimensions must be borne in mind. Where technical skills are significant and the companies take great pains to standardize their products, attention to ambiguity, image, rhetoric and the symbolism of social and business relations may have a somewhat less prominent interpretive capacity. However, in such cases, the concept of knowledge-intensive work/organization also becomes less relevant – knowledge-intensity to some extent runs against technical skills and product standardization. Consequently, where knowledge-intensity is central, so is ambiguity and, contingent upon this ambiguity, issues of image, rhetoric, orchestrating social relations and processes.

Identity

Identity constructions are of great significance for management and subordinates in knowledge-intensive companies due to problems of control as well as the consequences of ambiguity on self-esteem. The difficulties of employing

good performance measures and the ad hoc nature of much work lead many authors to emphasize cultural-ideological or clan control (Alvesson, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983), although, of course, typically a variety of control measures are employed. Cultural-ideological control means the targeting of values, ideas, beliefs, emotions and identification of employees. A considerable amount of self-organization is necessary. Even in those companies trying to standardize their products, 'client involvement adds to task uncertainty, requiring professionals to create their roles to some extent in the course of a client assignment' (Morris & Empson, 1998: 619).

Identity is central in forms of control associated with corporate culture, but also in other contexts where senior management tries to form or discipline the professionals through other means than pushing for (what is claimed to be) a company-specific set of ideas, virtues and ways of doing things. In addition, hierarchy and the prospect of making a career involve regulating identity through the creation and maintenance of a particular career mentality. Identity thus becomes significant as an object of management control and regulation to accomplish a 'subjectivity base' for the right kind of action, including whatever is in line with the image, rhetoric and orchestration of social interaction deemed to be appropriate.

Given the high level of ambiguity and the fluidity of organizational life and interactions with external actors, involving a strong dependence on somewhat arbitrary evaluations and opinions of others, many knowledge-intensive workers must struggle more for the accomplishment, maintenance and gradual change of self-identity, compared to workers whose competence and results are more materially grounded.

Contemporary social life in many ways destabilizes a coherent sense of self-identity. Compared to other groups, knowledge-intensive workers have some strong advantages in developing and maintaining a positive work identity. Education, status, high pay and interesting work tasks facilitate positive identity constructions. At the same time, the traditional mystique and exclusiveness of the professions and other knowledge-intensive workers have been weakened. The centrality of work and thus work-related identities to these workers, means that much is at stake and there is a strong sensitivity to lack of confirmation of the valued identity. Compared with people who invest less self-esteem in their work and who have lower expectations, people in knowledge-intensive companies are thus vulnerable to frustrations contingent upon ambiguity of performance and confirmation. My main point, however, is that despite the comparatively high status of knowledge workers, their self-esteem cannot be taken for granted and must be secured in an ambiguous and fluid world. In a study of a public relations company, a vice president

spoke very favourably about a young man in the company but when asked about his promotion prospects, the interviewee said: 'Well, just because he is great today does not mean he will be great tomorrow. Anything can happen. He has to keep his clients happy if he wants us to stay happy with him' (Jackall, 1988: 172).

The unpredictable, relationship-dependent and fluctuating character of this kind of work thus makes it difficult to accomplish and sustain a stable, steady growing feeling of competence and respect. As Deetz (1997) writes, 'the largely fluid nature of anything external to interactional accomplishments, provides for very active symbolic labour' (p. 157). A computer consultant interviewed by the author said that in the worst case, you can get an assignment where you do not know what it is supposed to lead to, you do not know the machine, the people you are supposed to work with do not want you there because the project has been sold on the wrong level, etc. Even though we should be careful not to overstress the fragility of people's self-esteem and identity (Newton, 1998) there are some indications that we should take this aspect seriously in much knowledge-intensive work, in particular the high demands on the 'level' of identity constructions that corporate and individual success and well-being call for.

Corporate identity – constructions of what the company stands for and in what respects it is more or less unique – is important here, as a bastion against perceptions of ambiguity and as a resource for employees. I will, however, concentrate on the identities of the employees, i.e. personal and social identity rather than organizational identity. In the rather extreme 'people-intensive' organizations that many knowledge-intensive companies may be said to be, systems, structures, technologies and products matter much less than what the personnel do and, in particular, how they impress clients, partners and others. Marketing and production are heavily sensitive to the identities of the personnel.

Identity regulation in knowledge-intensive companies

Management, in general, but perhaps even more strongly so in many knowledge-intensive companies, is partly about regulating people's identities – establishing standards for how employees should define themselves (Alvesson & Willmott, 2000). When complexity rules out, or reduces the efficiency of, direct control of employee behaviour or results, making an impression on how people see themselves is one way of safeguarding what are deemed to be suitable priorities and efforts. I will here analyse four kinds of identity-focusing control in many knowledge-intensive companies: identification with

the company as an institution, cultural control, normalization and subjectification.

Corporate identity and the institutionalization of the company

While most executives want to promote their employees' identification with, and love for, the organization, in some companies the opportunities for, and/or the value of, success in this respect will be better than in others. Many large knowledge-intensive firms are prestigious and membership of them brings status and identity-support.

The identification then works via a combination of internal corporate pride and status of being affiliated through the prestige of the organization. For the employee, there is a strong value attached to being a successful member of this specific institution, perceived as representing a value in itself (Selznick, 1957). The more distinctive, well-known and respected the organization, the more likely employees are to define themselves as belonging to it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). For less fortunate companies, managers may engage in great efforts to construct an appealing corporate identity. Efforts include elaborated rhetoric and image management regarding the claimed unique characteristics and excellence of the company (Alvesson, 1995).

To some extent, the very notion of being (constructed as) a knowledge-intensive company increases the chance of people letting their identities be formed and constrained through organizational membership. Issues around knowledge-intensiveness offer valuable raw material for identity constructions.

Cultural control

As mentioned earlier, most knowledge-intensive companies rely on a corporate ideology – a set of guiding ideas, beliefs, emotions and values, often being more influential than formal structures in controlling people. The specific control accomplished – reminders, (symbolic) rewards and reprimands – is typically decentred and exercised by a myriad of sources. Kunda (1992), for example, observed in his study of a large high tech company:

... a decentralization of power ... agents of control are everywhere; one is surrounded and constantly observed by members (including oneself) who, in order to further their own interests, act as spokespersons and enforcers of the organizational ideology.

(p. 155)

Normalization

Normalization means disciplining people through a standard of behaviour and performance, where any perceived or experienced discrepancy between the norm and the actual triggers efforts to reduce the discrepancy (Foucault, 1980). Normalization works through a mixture of self-perception and signals from others (superiors, colleagues, subordinates) systematically or sporadically engaging in surveillance and (informal or formal) examination.

The notion of 'being a professional' frequently serves as a control in this sense. Grey (1998) illustrates the normalizing capacity of this notion in an accounting firm through discussions with managers about rumours of sexual harassment. Neither the human resource problem – talented female workers may leave – nor the ethical issue seemed to bother the interviewees, but Grey's suggestion that such behaviour may appear 'unprofessional' seems to make a stronger impression (even though professionalism may be seen as unrelated to the issue of harassment). Sometimes professional and organizational definitions of optimal ways of behaving may be at odds with each other but in this case the definition of 'professional' was what senior partners and other people in the company meant by the term: 'being a professional meant being a BSF [name of the firm] type, implies that identification with the profession and the organization were coterminous' (p. 581).

Sometimes the norms to be followed are internalized to the point where people fully adopt the orientations deemed to be best for the company. As one partner in an accounting firm expressed it:

I do what I want, but the things I want are likely to help the firm because that is the way I have been trained. At one level we are completely independent, but we all march to the same tune without even thinking about it.

(Morris & Empson, 1998: 618)

Subjectification

This concept, also drawing upon Foucault, refers to a process tying individuals to a particular model of self-knowledge, i.e. individuals create themselves as distinct kinds of subjects. The subjects then mould themselves around a specific self-definition.

One example of this phenomenon, orchestrated by the company, is cultural matching, i.e. how the company encourages a fit between candidates and their job through a 'realistic' job description and by giving candidates

the chance to choose whether they fully match the job and the organization. This means a change of focus from surveillance of individual abilities, knowledge and traits to surveillance of candidates' own self-understanding and subjectification. Cultural matching exemplifies a kind of control in which individuals experience their work as a result of their autonomous and well-informed choice (Bergström, 1998: 200). Employees are encouraged to define themselves as the kind of people who would have chosen this kind of work; this definition then produces a standard to which subjects become committed.

Deetz (1995) observed the consequences of relabelling a computer professional service unit as an 'internal consultant group' and 'a profit centre'. This affected the identity of employees and meant new control processes:

Conceptions of self-value changed from pleasing a client and doing a good job as goods in themselves to the instrumentalization of these in the service of making money. Most worked harder for the same pay. Employees defined themselves as being of value based on feeling more important if someone was paying the company for their services, rather than based on work quality or the level of their own pay.

(p. 149)

These four forms of identity regulation 'from above' work partly through the receptiveness of people to developing and stabilizing work identities in the context of the investments in frequently prestigious and well-paid work, as well as the uncertainties and fluctuations of the confirmation of the self in work interactions.

Conclusions

This article does not, of course, suggest that knowledge is unimportant or that knowledge-intensive companies lack 'substance'. Technical skills, theoretical knowledge, practical experience, etc. are often vital and can be reduced neither to mere social opinions and ill-founded myths, nor to objective capacities existing beyond social meaning, doubt, judgement and negotiations. But we need to be more sceptical about the popular view that knowledge is increasingly significant and is the key feature for many organizations and workers.

We can thus take seriously not only that knowledge 'in itself' is frequently ambiguous but also that it is highly ambiguous as to what role this 'factor' plays in most knowledge-intensive – but presumably also in many

other – work and organizations. This perspective is quite different from traditional views of professions and contemporary functionalist writings about knowledge-intensive organizations. Abbott (referred to by Sharma, 1997) for example, claims that abstract knowledge is the key distinguishing characteristic of professions.

This article offers a counterpoint to the prevalent position. It inspires a more suspicious understanding of knowledge-intensive organizations and workers. This is in line with some recent work on the sociology of professions (e.g. Brante, 1988; Fores et al., 1991; Jamous & Peloille, 1970) rather than the ‘mainstream’ on knowledge-intensive organizations. Without denying that, as a key resource behind cognitive rationality in action, knowledge may sometimes be a functional resource that is directly applied in work, other functions and aspects of knowledge and knowledge talk may be as, or even more, central. Knowledge, i.e. claims of knowledge in social contexts, plays various roles, such as being: (a) a means for creating community and social identity through offering organizational members a shared language and a common way of relating to themselves and their world; (b) a resource for persuasion in marketing and interactions with customers; (c) a means of creating legitimacy and good faith with regard to actions and outcomes; and (d) obscuring uncertainty and counteracting doubt and reflection. This last point indicates that ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowledge work’ may lead to the opposite of what they claim – to ignorance and uncritical attitudes. In all these roles, knowledge may be seen as helpful in the construction of the identity of knowledge workers. Knowledge claims can thus also be seen as identity work.

The ambiguities involved in the notion of knowledge, what knowledge workers do and the difficulties in evaluating their work, mean that a potential (experienced) shakiness, arbitrariness and vulnerability characterize many knowledge-intensive workers and organizations. Difficulties in ‘grounding’ lead easily to problems securing organizational identity as well as worker identities. However, the options for imaginatively constructing the organization, work and workers in various ways are considerable as interpretations of material circumstances are less likely to provide an argument against the proposed constructions. In ‘ambiguity-intensive’ organizations, rhetoric, image management and ongoing negotiations become necessary and are offered a large arena (Alvesson, 1990). As clients and customers often have problems estimating the value of the product/service offered, establishing close social links between the knowledge-intensive company and the customer/client becomes vital. Interactions must be carefully orchestrated and efforts to strengthen ties given priority. Rhetoric, image production and the fine-tuning of social bonds rely upon supportive work identities. Successful

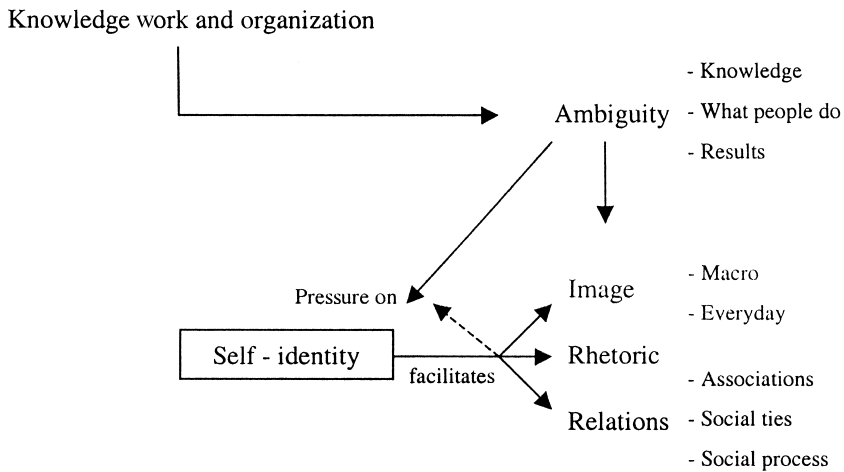


Figure 1 Some connections between ambiguity, image, rhetoric and identity in knowledge work and organizations

talk, appearance and interaction call for the right kind of subjectivity. There is a close and complex relationship between these qualities; identity constructions are being backed up by rhetoric and images, at the same time as the fluid and fluctuating nature of persuasive talk, appearance and adapting to the whims and wants of clients undermine the prospect of, as well as the usefulness of, fixed identity constructions. This is illustrated in Figure 1. All this implies that a vital part of management includes developing, controlling and securing work and organizational identities.

In sum: knowledge-intensive work tends to be ambiguity-intensive, which makes abilities to deal with rhetoric, regulate images and manage relationships and interactions with clients central. All these circumstances put some strain on, as well lead to the centrality of, the securing and regulating of identity. Ambiguity leads to space for innovative constructions of identity at both organizational and personal levels, but also puts pressure on activities to develop and obtain validation of these constructions. Ambiguity, in other words, provides an open arena for positive action, but also represents a tendency calling for defensive measures. Consequently, intensiveness not only includes knowledge, but also those other issues central to any claim for knowledge to become successful. Knowledge-intensive signifies an intensity of rhetoric, image, interaction and identity-regulation.

Note

- 1 Parts of this paper draws upon Alvesson (1993). Ambiguity, rhetoric and image are themes treated in the present article that were also covered in the earlier work. In order to expand and develop the approach, some overlap is necessary. In those few paragraphs where I draw upon the earlier work, most of the literature referred to was published after 1993 and novel comments and arguments have been added. The major points regarding social connections and interaction, identity and identity regulations are entirely new.

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