

# ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE WORKERS ENGAGEMENT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

IRENA FIGURSKA

**Abstract:** *The article discusses the importance of organizational culture for building engagement of knowledge workers in organizations functioning in knowledge based economy. Forming such a culture is complicated, long-lasting process, and the success is not guaranteed. In the theoretical part of this article the concept of knowledge worker is characterized. Then the essence, elements and the role of organizational culture of engagement are described. The attention is also paid to benefits the high level of knowledge workers engagement brings themselves and organizations in which they work. Further part of this article focuses mainly on results of the research on knowledge workers engagement. The main objective of the study was to determine the level of engagement of knowledge workers as well as to identify both determinants of engagement and actions taken by organizations affecting the level of employee engagement. Main source of primary data was obtained from the questionnaire survey conducted among working people with higher education. The final part of the article includes conclusions resulting from the results of the research and theoretical considerations.*

**Keywords:** *knowledge, knowledge worker, engagement, organizational culture*

**JEL Classification:** *M12, M14, M54*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge workers constitute a specific group of employees. In knowledge based economy their knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors, increasingly determine the success or failure of the organizations in which they work. One of the most important factors that determine the knowledge workers' contribution to the success of the organization, is their commitment to work, which is on the one hand a feature attributed to knowledge workers, on the other hand – the challenge for organizations and managers. Therefore knowledge-based organizations should make every effort to build a culture of engagement.

The purpose of this article is to identify the culture of engagement, in particular its elements positively affecting the level of knowledge workers commitment to work. To achieve this goal, the theoretical reflections on the knowledge workers engagement and on the culture of engagement have been supported by results of the survey conducted among working people with higher education. The aim of the research was to determine the level of engagement of knowledge workers in organizations and to determine how the various engagement drivers identified in the theoretical part of this article are used in organizations in the process of building employee engagement.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS ENGAGEMENT

Knowledge workers are usually described as employees who possess high degrees of expertise, education or experience [3] and are paid for efficiency of thinking [19]. They are well-informed, active and responsible, aware of their role and self-worth, independent participants of the organization [13], who work not only with knowledge and information, but also on them [16]. They understand, define, influence and help shape their domain of influence, knowledge, activity and responsibility [14]. The most

significant goal of knowledge workers is active participation in knowledge management processes.

Considering various definitions and characteristics of knowledge workers for the purpose of this article it is assumed that *“the knowledge worker is the employee whose passion, work and professional career are associated with active participation in the knowledge management processes (localization, acquiring, development, sharing, use and preservation)”* [9]. Knowledge worker is a person who: *has* (knowledge, experience, social competences, values, etc.), *wants to* (develop, share and use knowledge, experience, social competences, as well as use resources, methods, tools etc.), *is able to* (use knowledge, experiences, tools, resources, methods etc. thanks to his skills), *can* (is provided by the organization the opportunity to actively participate in the realization of knowledge management processes), and *is needed* (his knowledge, experience, social competencies, engagement etc. are important for achieving the objectives of the organization) [9].

Core activities taken by knowledge workers are related to realization of KM processes and involve: applying, presenting, sharing, analyzing, organizing, evaluating, retrieving, storing and securing information with the goal of making decisions and delivering services [1]. These activities determine roles they play in the organization, such as: controllers, helpers, learners, linkers, networkers, organizers, retrievers, sharers, solvers, or trackers [16].

Knowledge workers create the greatest added value, affecting the value of organizations in which they work [4], therefore in companies which base their competitiveness on creating and using knowledge, obtaining a high level of knowledge workers engagement becomes necessity.

Employee engagement is a growing area of focus for both scientists and business practitioners. In general engagement of employees is associated with their: attitude, behaviour, emotions, potential, actions, and contribution to

the organization's success [2; 17; 21]. In this article employee engagement is understood as the extent to which workers are involved with, committed to, and passionate about their work [12]. Engagement of knowledge workers reflects their connections to the organization across three dimensions: *rational*, showing how well employees understand their roles and responsibilities, *emotional*, presenting how much passion and energy they bring to work, and *motivational*, reflecting how well they perform in their roles [2].

Further reflections on building knowledge workers engagement require the adoption of two basic assumptions: (1) employee engagement is gradable, what means that can be of high, medium or low level, (2) the level of the employee engagement can be influenced, what means that engagement can be a subject of management.

Justification for management of knowledge workers engagement are benefits it brings to employees and organizations in which they work. Engaged employees: derive more pleasure from their work, have a sense of realization of their potential, feel that they are doing something important for themselves and the environment, realize their ideas and professional ambitions, go beyond the routine procedures, undertake challenges, improve working methods and improve the organization as well as actively shape the work environment. They enjoy better physical and mental health, are more satisfied with their life, feel positive emotions more often, and their self-esteem and sense of meaning increase [10].

Thanks to a high level of knowledge workers engagement, organizations observe: increase in operational performance, higher profit growth, reduction of reliance on financial incentives for employee engagement, reduction of sick days and absenteeism, reduction of recruitment costs due to higher retention rates, better realization of business strategies by empowering people [20].

### 3. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

Organizational culture is "(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" [18]. Corporate culture includes: values, norms, practices and artefacts. *Values* indicate what people in the organization believe is worth doing or having. *Norms* are the shared beliefs about how people in the company should behave or what they should do. *Practices* are the formal or informal routines used in the organization to accomplish work. *Artefacts* are visible and tangible aspects of an organization which distinguish the given company out of others.

The culture of the organization has significant influence on various aspects of its functioning: standardises people's patterns of behaviour, increasing their predictability and replaces temporary control, 'commonises' employees' aspirations, goals, hopes and concerns, as well as enables people to interpret and assess the surrounding reality similarly [11].

Organizational culture is also a very important source of information and knowledge about the organization and its

functioning [8]. In companies building their competitive advantage on knowledge, organizational culture shapes assumption about what knowledge is and what knowledge is worth managing, mediates the relationships between individual and organization-level knowledge, creates a context for interaction that determines the value derived from knowledge, shapes the processes by which new organizational knowledge is captured, legitimated and distributed, as well as shapes the organization's reaction to new knowledge [5]. The culture of the organization has also an impact on what tools, procedures, processes etc. are implemented in the process of knowledge management. The aforementioned tools, procedures and processes will take appropriate effect only if they are compatible with 'the character' of the organization [8].

Referring to the topic of this article, it is necessary to explain the concept of the culture of engagement. This culture can be defined as the culture which values, norms and practices at the same time (1) enable the realization of the objectives of the organization and (2) meet the widely understood needs of knowledge workers, which leads to an increase in both their job satisfaction and their contribution to work. Some needs of knowledge workers are universal, characteristic of all employees (eg. the need for security or respect), while others are specific to this particular group of people, or in this group manifest themselves with greater intensity (eg. the need for self-fulfillment). The organization can positively influence the degree of certain employees needs satisfaction by shaping the appropriate organizational culture.

Considering relations between organizational culture and employees engagement, it is worth mentioning the results of the study conducted by Hewitt Associates [6] which confirm a synergic effect between engagement of employees and cultural alignment. Organizations with high level of employees engagement face better alignment between current and desired values as well as between personal (expressed through behaviour of individuals) and organizational (reflected in systems and processes) values, than organizations with low level of engagement. Appropriate culture "can attract and engage high-potential talent who bring their strong capabilities and are also energized by the company's core values" [6]. Such a culture create a stimulating work environment and processes where top talent are inspired and supported to provide extra effort. Alignment of organization's values with values of the individual, guarantees superior levels of involvement and results in greater levels of accountability, trust, innovation, and performance. In organizations with better alignment work is a positive experience for employees.

The question arises - which elements of the organizational culture positively affect the level of knowledge workers engagement? First of all, it should be remembered that the basic aim of the knowledge workers work is their active participation in processes of knowledge management, that is why the culture of engagement must be at the same time a culture supporting knowledge management, which main elements are: trust, cooperation and learning [8]. So, taking into account on the one hand, the characteristics of knowledge workers, on the other hand the objectives and requirements posed before them by organizations in which they work, cultural factors affecting

the level of knowledge workers engagement have been identified and grouped in specific areas, as follows:

- working conditions – organizational conditions, technical conditions, work performed vs. qualifications,
- recognition - noticing and appreciating employees successes, considering employee's opinion in professional matters, participation in decision-making,
- concern about employees - work-life balance preservation, employees' sense of security in the organization, pay level vs. contribution to work,
- trust - respect for employees, independence in deciding how to work, competences of superiors and co-workers,
- cooperation - feedback on the job, flow of information, atmosphere at work,
- development - opportunities to knowledge and skills development, challenging work (requiring continuous improvement of workers), promotion opportunities.

Individual factors listed above could affect the shape of more than one area, eg. respect for employees has an impact not only on the level of trust in the organization, but also on the cooperation and recognition. The above assignment of factors to specific areas is therefore arbitrary.

#### 4. SCIENTIFIC AIM AND METHODS

The subject of the survey was knowledge workers engagement in organizations. The purpose of the study was to gain respondents opinions on the subject of the state of knowledge workers engagement and to determine how various drivers of engagement are used in organizations in the process of building employee engagement.

The study was conducted by means of a direct survey in March 2015 among working people with higher education. The instrument of data collection was questionnaire consisting of closed-ended, semi open-ended and open-ended questions, with a Likert-scale, multiple choice and single choice. In addition to demographic data, information about various aspects of knowledge workers engagement was collected, including: a state of engagement, satisfaction and self-motivation to work, determinants of their decisions about staying or leaving organizations in which they work, drivers of engagement and actions taken in organizations which shape (or not) a culture of engagement. Overall 250 questionnaires were distributed, 210 of them were correctly filled, giving a return of 84%. Respondents were a diverse group in terms of age, gender, place of work and position.

The analysis of the survey results was made with a full knowledge of the limitations resulting from the relatively small number of respondents. Thus, although the generalization based on this research is not possible, the results are important information for organizations and managers who want to build engagement of knowledge workers.

#### 5. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

As mentioned above, one of the objectives of the study was to determine the level of engagement of knowledge workers, what was done by analyzing answers to questions concerning symptoms of engagement. It was assumed that truly engaged employees: a) do not intend to leave the organization in which they work; b) give of themselves more

than is required; c) are very satisfied with their work; d) speak with pride about their organizations.

Thorough analysis of responses to questions about symptoms of engagement led to the conclusion that these fully engaged in work knowledge workers, which are characterized by the highest levels of meeting of all mentioned above criteria, constitute only the 7.3% of all respondents, which is a very poor result. It is worth noting that when asked directly to assess the level of their engagement, 44.5% of respondents stated that they are highly committed to work. The difference between subjectively assessed and objectively verified (through analysis of answers to questions about symptoms of engagement) the level of their commitment to work, may be caused by misunderstanding of the concept: commitment to work or/and their inner need of positive perception of themselves as an employee.

Respondents were also asked about determinants of organizational culture of engagement and evaluation of their use in organizations in which they work. They were supposed to allot points, where 5 points meant the highest level of a factor, and 1 point – the lowest. Then the average of points was calculated for each factor (table 1). Engagement drivers were divided into 6 areas of organizational culture: working conditions, recognition, concern about employees, trust, cooperation and development. Each area was characterized by three determinants of knowledge workers engagement.

The analysis of individual areas of organizational culture of engagement shows, that the highest rated area is trust (average 4.08), and the lowest – recognition (3,22) and concern about employees (3,23).

Generally, employees feel that they are respected at work (4,23) and most of them can independently decide how to work (4,13) which means, that superiors trust them in professional matters. On the other hand the level of superiors competence was assessed slightly lower (3,89) which indicates that in professional matters knowledge workers do not always trust them.

Organizational and technical conditions of work were assessed similarly, at mean level (3,79 and 3,81 respectively), while consistency between work performed by them and their qualifications was assessed at 3,49. This means that the potential of knowledge workers is underemployed. Atmosphere at work is less than good (3,90), but flow of information (3,59) and feedback on the job (3,50) definitely need to be improved, because these elements are evident barriers of cooperation in organizations.

In case of most knowledge workers their work is challenging and requires a systematic learning (4,07), but opportunities to knowledge and skills development are relatively small (3,42) and promotion opportunities - even smaller (2,79).

As it was already stated, the level of recognition and the level of organizations' concern about employees reached the lowest level. Superiors relatively rarely notice and appreciate employees successes (3,18), consider their opinion in professional matters (3,26) and involve them in decision-making (3,23).

**Table 1** Areas and elements of organizational culture of engagement

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT					
Areas	Elements (drivers)	Assessment	Areas	Elements (drivers)	Assessment
<i>Working conditions</i>	organizational working conditions	3,79	<i>Trust</i>	respect for employees	4,23
	work performed vs. qualifications	3,49		independence in deciding how to work	4,13
	technical working conditions	3,81		competences of superiors	3,89
	<i>average</i>	<b>3,70</b>		<i>average</i>	<b>4,08</b>
<i>Recognition</i>	noticing and appreciating employees successes	3,18	<i>Cooperation</i>	feedback on the job	3,50
	considering employee's opinion in professional matters	3,26		flow of information	3,59
	participation in decision-making	3,23		atmosphere at work	3,90
	<i>average</i>	<b>3,22</b>		<i>average</i>	<b>3,66</b>
<i>Concern about employees</i>	work-life balance preservation	3,58	<i>Development</i>	opportunities to knowledge and skills development	3,42
	employees' sense of security in the organization	3,55		work requiring continuous improvement of workers	4,07
	pay level vs. contribution to work	2,56		promotion opportunities	2,79
	<i>average</i>	<b>3,23</b>		<i>average</i>	<b>3,43</b>

For many participants of the survey, work-life balance is not maintained, as evidenced by the average rating for this driver (3,58), many of them have no sense of security in organizations in which they work (3,55). Generally, the majority of respondents believe that pay they receive does not correspond to their contribution to the work (2,56).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Although, as mentioned in the theoretical part of this study, a high level of knowledge workers engagement brings them and organizations, in which they work, measurable benefits, in many companies actions aimed at building a culture of engagement are not undertaken, or are insufficient, incidental, inappropriate. This is confirmed by the results of the research, which clearly indicate that in the area of functioning of organizational culture of engagement there is still much to be done. A small percentage of knowledge workers, participating in the study, is really highly involved in work, and determinants of organizational culture of engagement, specified in the survey, are assessed by them at the most mean level.

However, organizations that base or plan to base their competitiveness on knowledge development and use, should create the organizational culture of engagement, which is grounded on such values as: trust, cooperation, development, concern about employees, recognition and proper working condition. However, building such a culture is difficult and long lasting process, which requires:

- understanding and acceptance of this concept by all employees in the organization,

- consistency between what is important for the organization and what is important for employees,
- consistency between what is said and what is done.

Activities aimed at building a culture of engagement should eliminate the gap between the current and target organizational culture. This means that without a clear vision of organizational culture of engagement, actions taken in the field of its building will be accidental and can be counterproductive. Such actions need to be included in all organizational processes, procedures and policies conducted in different areas of the company's functioning, eg. in the area of human resource management. In the process of building and maintaining a culture of engagement a special role should be attributed to knowledge workers' superiors and their management style.

Building a culture of engagement requires a systematic study on knowledge workers needs and their expectations towards the organization, bearing in mind that employees should be asked about issues on which the organization can and wants to influence. Asking knowledge workers for specific issues the organization give them hope for change. But when the expected changes are not taken, their engagement in work decreases.

Building a culture of engagement in the knowledge-based organization is a complex problem. The following article doesn't deplete the topic and is only a basis for further considerations.

## REFERENCES

- [1] BERNSTEIN, M. 2010. *Knowledge Work 2020. The future of knowledge work and what it might mean to each of you*. CEO. Polo Alto Research Center. XEROX Summit 2010. Online. [cit. 2015.03.28] Available at: [download.microsoft.com/.../Mark%20Bernstein%20Xerox%20Summit%...](http://download.microsoft.com/.../Mark%20Bernstein%20Xerox%20Summit%...)
- [2] *Closing the Engagement Gap: A Road Map for Driving Superior Business Performance. Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study 2007-2008*. Towers Perrin 2010. Online. [cit. 2015.04.21] Available at: [https://c.yimcdn.com/sites/www.simnet.org/resource/group/066D79D1-E2A8-4AB5-B621-60E58640FF7B/leadership\\_workshop\\_2010/towers\\_perrin\\_global\\_workfor.pdf](https://c.yimcdn.com/sites/www.simnet.org/resource/group/066D79D1-E2A8-4AB5-B621-60E58640FF7B/leadership_workshop_2010/towers_perrin_global_workfor.pdf)
- [3] DAVENPORT, T.H. 2005. *Thinking for a living. How to get better performance and results from knowledge workers*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005. 240 p. ISBN 1-59139-423-6.
- [4] DAVENPORT, T. H. 2007. Zarządzanie pracownikami wiedzy. Kraków: Wolters Kluwer, 2007. 176 p. ISBN 978-83-7526-030-4.
- [5] DE LONG, D. 1997. *Building the Knowledge-Based Organization: How Culture Drives Knowledge Behaviors*. Working Paper. Center for Business Innovation 1997. Ernst & Young. 29 p.

- [6] **Engagement and Culture: Engaging Talent in Turbulent Times**. Aon Hewitt, 2009. Online. [cit. 2015.04.21] [http://www.aon.com/attachments/thought-leadership/hewitt\\_pov\\_engagement\\_and\\_culture.pdf](http://www.aon.com/attachments/thought-leadership/hewitt_pov_engagement_and_culture.pdf)
- [7] FIGURSKA I. 2012. **Cultural Aspects of Knowledge Management**. "Human Resources Management & Ergonomics" nr 2/2012. Žilina 2012, 66-77 p. ISSN 1337-0871.
- [8] FIGURSKA, I. 2012. **Zarządzanie wiedzą w organizacji**. Słupsk: Wydawnictwo WHSZ, 2012. 397 p. ISBN 978-83-88473-75-3.
- [9] FIGURSKA, I. 2015. **Personal Aspects of Knowledge Management**. [in:] A. Sokół (ed.). *Managing Diversity in the Organization. Creativity-Knowledge-Competence-Innovation-Trust*. London: Sciemcee Publishing, 2015. 79–106 p. ISBN 978-0-9928772-3-1.
- [10] **Korzyści dla pracowników**. Barometr Zaangażowania. Online. [cit. 2015.03.23] Available at: <https://barometrzaangazowania.com/uslugi/korzysci/korzysci-dla-pracownikow>
- [11] KOŹMIŃSKI A. K., JEMIELNIAK D., LATUSEK D. **Współczesne spojrzenie na kulturę organizacji**. „E-mentor” 3(30)/2009. 4-14 p. ISSN 1731-7428.
- [12] MACEY, W., SCHNEIDER, B. 2008. **The Meaning of Employee Engagement**. "Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice" 1(1), 2008. 3–30 p. ISSN 1754-9434.
- [13] MORAWSKI, M. 2003. **Problematyka zarządzania pracownikami wiedzy**. „Przegląd Organizacji” 1/2003. 17–20 p. ISSN-0137-7221.
- [14] MORELLO, D., CALDWELL, F. 2001. **What Are Knowledge Workers? What Makes Them Thick?** GartnerGroup Research, Note SPA-12-7780. Resource Id: 320035. Online. [cit. 2014.10.12]. Available at: <http://www.marcusball.com/work/TechReference/What%20Are%20Knowledge%20Workers%20What%20Makes%20Them%20Tick.htm>
- [15] NICKOLS, F. 2012. **The Shift from Manual Work to Knowledge Work**. Distance Consulting LLC. Online. [cit. 2015.03.25]. Available at: [http://www.nickols.us/shift\\_to\\_KW.htm](http://www.nickols.us/shift_to_KW.htm).
- [16] REINHARDT, W., SCHMIDT, B., SLOEP, P., DRACHSLER, H. 2011. **Knowledge Worker Roles and Actions – Results of Two Empirical Studies**. "Knowledge and Process Management", 18(3)/2011. 150–174 p. ISSN 1099-1441.
- [17] SCHAUFELI, W. B., BAKKER, A. B. 2004. **Job Demands, Job Resources and Their Relationship with Burnout and Engagement: A Multi-sample Study**. "Journal of Organizational Behavior", 25(3), 2004. 293–315 p. ISSN 1099-1379.
- [18] SCHEIN, E.H. **Organizational culture**. "American Psychologist", Vol 45(2), 1990. 109-119 p. ISSN: 0003-066X.
- [19] SKRZYPEK, E. 2009. **Kreatywność pracowników wiedzy i ich wpływ na innowacyjność przedsiębiorstw**. E. Okoń-Horodyńska, R. Wisła. (eds.). *Kapitał intelektualny i jego ochrona*. Warszawa: Instytut Wiedzy i Innowacji. 207–217 p. ISBN: 978-83-606-5314-2.
- [20] **The Real Value of Engaged Employees. New Thinking on Employee Engagement Strategies**. KPMG. 2011. Online. [cit. 2015.03.22]. Available at: <http://www.kpmg.com/US/en/IssuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/Documents/real-value-of-engagedemployees.pdf>.
- [21] **Trends in Global Employee Engagement**. Consulting Global Compensation & Talent. Aon Hewitt. 2014. Online. [cit. 2015.03.22]. 50 p. Available at: <http://www.aon.com/attachments/human-capital-consulting/2014-trends-in-global-employee-engagement-report.pdf>.

#### Irena FIGURSKA, PhD

Pomeranian University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Pedagogy and Social Work  
 Westerplatte Str. 64, 76-200 Słupsk, Poland  
 e-mail: irenafigurska@vp.pl