ABSTRACT

This chapter questions the clarity of the concepts of “knowledge society” and “knowledge-intensive organization”. In particular, the author asserts that the notion that postindustrial society is more knowledge intensive than industrial society is a self-serving proposition made by academics and organizational consultants to emphasize the importance of their own industries. Since all organizations are knowledge-intensive in major ways, the specific meanings of a newly emergent kind of knowledge-intensive organization need to be clarified. The author undertakes this by means of an analysis of research universities.

INTRODUCTION

Research universities could seem to be among the best contemporary embodiments of knowledge-intensive organizations, given the vast quantities of people and knowledge resources at their disposal and their mission to expand and transmit knowledge. In addition, universities claim to be preparing students to work in the “knowledge society” of the future. Thus it would seem that universities are specially situated in a position of expertise about life in the knowledge society and in knowledge-intensive organizations. I do not believe this is the case.

Despite the many Ph.D.s awarded, students taught, research projects undertaken, and libraries/databases, universities generally do not embody the defining characteristics of knowledge-inten-
Are Research Universities Knowledge-Intensive Learning Organizations?

... organizational participants in their own institutions or in the world beyond the university, and many of the students that universities train graduate lacking the competence to perform the jobs for which they are hired.

The situation of faculty and students in the sciences and engineering is somewhat better because they maintain multiple and continuing contacts with the world outside the university, often work in teams, and train students through participation in projects. However, in general, the effectiveness of research universities as contributors to the training of new participants in the knowledge society, beyond being successful businesses in their own right, is limited.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides a provisional analysis of what seems to be a key issue: If a high quantity of knowledge and a large staff of highly trained people automatically give rise to a knowledge-intensive organization, then research universities would be, by definition, knowledge-intensive organizations. However, since universities are not knowledge-intensive organizations by any reasonable definition, exploring why not reveals three things. First, it shows that knowledge-intensive organizations are a product of structures, relationships, and dynamics in the organization, not of the quanta of knowledge they contain, the level of education of their personnel, or their sectoral location. Second, a knowledge-intensive organization must have at least some of the key characteristics of learning organizations (Argyris and Schön, 1996). That is to say, unless organizations are capable of creatively modifying their structures, behavior, and alignment with the environment, then they simply cannot be knowledge-intensive organizations at all. Third, these characteristics of learning organizations are generally lacking in research universities which are Tayloristically-organized and yet loosely-coupled systems.

To make these points, I focus on research universities and compare some current models of knowledge-intensive organizations and learning organizations with the way knowledge and learning are organized in universities. To anticipate, my argument is that, though research universities are dedicated to the development and dissemination of knowledge, there are many ways that they do not function as knowledge-intensive organizations and they lack most of the characteristics of learning organizations. Once this argument is made, I turn to asking if universities wished to become more predominantly knowledge-intensive organizations, how they would have to change and I close asking if these changes could be made while avoiding the further dilution of some of the key disciplinary knowledge development and management functions research universities perform.

Conceptual Background

The literature on the knowledge society and knowledge-intensive organizations is chaotic intellectual terrain. Beyond the inherent complexity of the issues, with so many disciplines and non-academic players engaged in the many dimensions of these topics, the subject itself is a labyrinth. To negotiate this terrain, I had to clarify for myself what I understand to be some of the key concepts and terms and will share the results of this effort as my point of departure.

It is necessary to begin with knowledge itself. Much of the literature takes particular views on knowledge for granted. Many academics have narrowed the notion of knowledge in ways that permit them to claim ownership over key forms of knowledge and to the right to arbitrate what is good and not so good knowledge in particular disciplines. I am especially sensitive to this because I am an action researcher. Action research
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