Chapter 7.18
Evaluation of Human Action:
Foucault's Power/Knowledge Corollary

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ABSTRACT

The people dynamic is especially significant when trying to understand knowledge management. One aspect of interactions between groups of people is the impact of knowledge, be it a gain or a lack of knowledge. The work of Michael Foucault addresses this in his thesis on power/knowledge. By analyzing traditional theories and introducing Foucault's power/knowledge ideas, the following provides some insights into the actions and interactions of people within organizational settings.

INTRODUCTION

In today's knowledge economy, innovating organizations are challenged to maximize a critically important asset -- their human capital. The interaction of knowledge workers with information and communication technologies (ICTs) has presented a particularly interesting dynamic to researchers who study changes in related behavioral phenomena. One such phenomenon is self-monitoring. The following serves to outline the economics of self-monitoring and the integral role of ICTs in enabling knowledge workers to self-monitor. By merging Foucault's power/knowledge ideas with classical agency theory, it becomes possible to gain a richer understanding of human capital dynamics in a knowledge economy.

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DYNAMICS OF SELF-MONITORING

Self-monitoring activities have been examined from psycho-cognitive perspectives (Mehra et al., 2001; Kilduff and Day, 1994; Caldwell and

O'Reilly, 1982) and from structuralist power/knowledge perspectives (Foucault, 1980; Poster, 1990; Coombs et al, 1992). Although these writings appear to take radically different views of self-monitoring phenomena, we find that they each address different but complementary issues that together shape a more holistic explanation of the self-monitoring activities we have observed.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIORS AND INCENTIVES

What is self-monitoring, and why do people do it? According to psychological theorists, the propensity to self-monitor is a personality trait that ranges from high to low. High self-monitors actively try to shape their social worlds by constructing public selves that they believe will affect the perceptions of others in socially-enhancing ways (Snyder and Gangestad, 1986). There is some evidence that they are correct in this belief. Researchers have linked self-monitoring activities to a range of workplace-related outcomes, including performance, leadership, information management and boundary spanning (Kilduff and Day, 1994; Zaccaro et al., 1991; Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1982). For high self-monitors the incentives are the rewards associated with career advancement, such as monetary compensation, higher organizational rank, and enhanced reputation within the organization, the industry and the wider social space. Therefore, to understand self-monitoring as a personality trait means that we must study how those traits form and how those traits influence identity-shaping behavior (Erikson, 1974; Winter et al., 1998).

However, structuralists and interactionists argue that social networks mediate the effects of self-monitoring (White, 1992; Goffman, 1959). Researchers have found that the effects of self-monitoring activities do depend on the social actor's position in the network, but that high-self monitors tend to occupy the central positions (Mehra et al., 2001). In earlier studies, high self-monitors were found to be particularly effective as boundary spanners, who benefit from self-monitoring by acting as go-betweens who are able to obtain information about resources and opportunities from a number of disconnected sources (Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1982).

While these studies have begun to examine the social networks of self-monitors, they have not systematically linked the use of ICTs to self-monitoring and network exchanges that affect career outcomes. Yet, within organizations, an increasing number of communications and interactions are aided by ICTs, which are generally provided and supported by the organization expressly for such purposes. One might hypothesize that high-self monitors would also use ICTs to greater effect. Extensive research work by Wickramaisnghe and Lamb (Wickramasinghe, 1999; Wickramasinghe and Lamb, 2002) suggests that effective self-monitoring *does* also depend on ICT availability and use; and that there *is* an economic effect of ICT-aided self-monitoring – not only to the individual, but also to the organization. In other words, ICTs facilitate self-monitoring behaviors that result in beneficial effects. Moreover, some ICT systems also allow the organization, department or group to self-monitor and profile itself, in ways that aggregate or reflect on individual activities (Lamb and Poster, 2003.)

Observations in healthcare organizations (Wickramasinghe, 1999; Wickramasinghe and Lamb, 2002; Wickramasinghe, 2007) and other recent studies (Bloomfield et al., 1997; Doolin, 2004), however, caution against an easy correlation between ICT-aided self-monitoring and desired outcomes. Among medical professionals, it is actually rather difficult to extract self-monitoring behaviors from organizational monitoring activities. As we will describe in detail in later sections, physicians act as managers, principals and practitioners within their healthcare organizations,