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Rehumanising Knowledge Work through Fluctuating Support Networks: A grounded theory

Judith A. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Through the basic social structural process of *fluctuating support networks*, knowledge workers self-organise to overcome the dehumanising impact of a rapidly changing workplace context. Such networks operate outside the formal organisation. They are epiphenomenal - self-emerging, self-organising, and self-sustaining. Participation is voluntary and intuitive. The growth of fluctuating support networks facilitates a **rehumanising** process which serves to counterbalance the dehumanisation that knowledge workers experience in the face of persistent and unpredictable change.

The core variable of the theory, the basic social psychological process of *rehumanising*, is characterised by *authenticity, depth and meaning, recognition and respect, safety and healing and kindred sharing*. Rehumanising gives meaning to work while sustaining *energy and commitment*. Fluctuating support network relationships offer members validation and subtle support. Members pursue shared interests and passions. Activities are characterised by *challenge, experimentation, creativity and learning*. The resultant sense of achievement renews energy and builds *confidence*, enhancing *commitment* and *bonding* thereby sustaining network engagement.

Social Structural Conditions Precipitating Network Engagement

Today's knowledge workplace is increasingly characterised by complexity, compression and intensification; the result of continuous and often rapid change (Foley, 2002) and where perhaps the only thing constant is change. Even the largest and most successful organisations may unexpectedly encounter a "zone of turbulence" (Pascale, 1994 in Kirkbride & Durcan, 2002). An increasing diffusion of boundaries within and between organisations renders knowledge work highly interdependent. At the same time, careers are largely viewed as "boundaryless" and

workers as nomads moving from organisation to organisation, either of choice or of necessity, as their environments continually reconfigure (Drucker, 2002; Pittinsky & Shih, 2004; Sullivan, 1999). Added to this, the compression of time created by communications technologies and increasing workloads has fostered compressed, dehumanised interactions.

While there is an increasing recognition that knowledge work is more organic and interconnected, many organisations remain trapped in linear, assembly-line work structures and processes. Coping with the complexity, compression and turbulence of change has raised levels of workplace stress so that it is now a significant factor for many. In particular, the workload intensification so often associated with downsizing leaves line managers little time to focus attention on human resource management issues (MacNeil & Renwick, 2002). Managers describe the immensity of the change underway in organisations as causing many workers to give up and barely function. Motivation and commitment decline. Management in the midst of such change is much less about predicting, planning and controlling and much more about facilitating and coaching performance.

The dynamics involved in coping with change inevitably generate resistance (Bovey & Hede, 2001; Galt, 2002). Knowledge workers respond in various ways. Entrenchment is a common response as individual workers “silo” their efforts and work in pockets with minimal interaction or movement across the silos, keeping “heads down” and “staying under the radar”. The more people fear the uncertainty of further change, the more they seek to retain the status quo as a means of establishing equilibrium within their environment (Chakravorti, 2004). With sufficient resistance, the work environment becomes staid and segmented, effectively “dumbing down” the organisation and its people. The workplace ossifies. Over time, an aura of pendulous resistance pervades as systems and workers become stagnant and stale. Over time, the syndrome leaves workers less and less open to future change efforts. A cultural resistance to change produces increasingly tentative and qualified responses to subsequent organisational change initiatives. Engagement may be superficial and transient.

While recognising that change is needed, workers become risk averse. They lose their ability to trust and their confidence to

move into the uncertainty of change. Instead, efforts focus on protecting turf and hoarding knowledge as a source of power. Secrecy, mistrust and competition escalate. A cynical disengagement ensues. The resultant fragmentation and diffusion of collective efforts further erodes organisational intelligence. Opportunistic behaviours may surface and raise the level of cynicism and scepticism. The outcome can be an intellectual and emotional paralysis brought on by a saturated coping capacity (DeMeuse & Marks, 2002). A deficit mentality sets in.

When resistance is insufficient to impede change, knowledge workers may deny its inevitability by seeking to undermine the planned change through ‘flannelling’, a strategy of dissent that quietly subverts rules of cultural control (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Eventually, however, the dynamic tension between the persistent need to change and the cultural resistance to change builds until the balance tips. Overwhelmed workers, unable to let go of the past, ‘awfulise’ their work environments. In so doing, they personalise the actions of the organisation and management and adopt victim status. Awfulising contributes to the downward spiral of dehumanisation as perceived by knowledge workers. They may, in turn, be typecast and stigmatised within the changing organisational environment. In the process, responsibility for the problem of coping with change frequently shifts from the organisation to the individual and a mutual disillusionment follows as both workers and organisations wrestle with the challenges of coping with change and resistance to change. The result is a downward spiral of mutual dehumanisation.

In this environment of persistent and unpredictable change and mutual dehumanisation, the basic problem or concern expressed by knowledge workers is the loss of the human dimension in workplace interactions. This dehumanisation of the knowledge workplace is characterised by a work environment that is compressed, fearful, isolating, bureaucratic and legalistic; by interactions that are atomised and inauthentic; and by work assignments that erode autonomy and identity. Individuals hide out in cubicles, feeling alone and isolated.

The organisational quest for efficiency reduces opportunities to facilitate relationship building, compromises valuable conversations and erodes trust and collaboration as management

attention shifts from managing people to managing scarce resources. Organisations ‘churn’ workers, shifting and divesting human capital as deemed necessary (Cappelli, 2004). Many workers are left feeling unrecognised and devalued. Even those who retain their jobs are not spared in this environment. The heightened stress, increased workloads and perpetual insecurity of this “survivor syndrome” can reduce job commitment, lowering morale and job satisfaction (Vahtera et al., 2004). Survivors of organisational transitions exhibit depression, distraction, loss of trust and confidence (DeMeuse & Marks, 2002). These job survivors also present with physiological conditions symptomatic of elevated stress levels (Pepper & Messinger, 2000a, 2000b).

Rehumanising

The instability of many workplace environments results in a loss of autonomy and even identity for many knowledge workers. Over time, nothing feels real and they long to reconnect with what they value - what they are passionate about. They long for a place to be real, to feel safe to express their authentic selves, to explore, to play and to risk - a place where they can relax, release tensions and open up. In short, they long to rehumanise their workplaces. The concept of *rehumanising* explains how knowledge worker resolve their concerns with the dehumanising impact of a changing knowledge workplace – how they restore the human dimension in their work relationships and working environments. Rehumanising gives meaning to their work while sustaining energy and commitment.

The Properties of Rehumanising

Rehumanising is characterised by *authenticity, depth and meaning, recognition and respect, safety and healing and kindred sharing*.

The bureaucratic relationships in many knowledge workplaces lack authenticity. They are power-laden transactions. Whether the power can be attributed to position, influence or alliance, the tensional shifts can leave individuals feeling uneasy, anxious, without a base or grounding. The need to play roles in organisations and to assume “corporate identities” also leads to inauthentic voices; disconnecting individuals from what they really feel. Identity and purpose in work are eroded as “everyone plays the script”.

With increasing intensification and specialisation of knowledge, workers are siloed. The time available for more general interactions is reduced. Removing opportunities for broad interpersonal contact further dehumanises the work environment and reduces the potential for authentic engagement. For many highly skilled knowledge workers, moving up in the organisation has its down side as they find themselves taking on managerial roles that progressively distance them from their areas of specialised expertise. The stretch up the organisational ladder can leave them vulnerable and stressed. There is a risk of vulnerability, as well, in emotional disclosures in the workplace. Individuals frequently feel they have to restrict emotional displays or run the risk of being seen as weak – a vulnerability that can restrict career progression. Emotions are held in check and authenticity compromised.

Authenticity is highly valued as essential to sustained interaction. Authentic engagement fuels likening and bonding, facilitating an ease in working together and accelerating collaboration. The rehumanising process in fluctuating support networks aligns personal values and goals; these are places where egos and agendas are put aside so that real dialogue and caring for one another can prevail. Authenticity stretches the ability to see diverse perspectives, to challenge assumptions, discuss the undiscussable and examine sacred cows without the worry of causing offence.

Fluctuating support network members express feelings of deep connection to other members of their networks as well as to the work in which they jointly engage. They speak of seeking experiences that rise above the routine, that challenge and that spark their learning. Work takes on real **depth and meaning**. The connection goes beyond just accomplishing the task at hand. Here, the work itself really matters. This deep connection creates a stickiness that not only bonds individuals personally but also deepens their bond to their professional concern. As such, fluctuating support networks create “interspaces” (Nordanger, 2002) in professional work that enable knowledge workers to regain some control over their work situations and ward off intrusions that diminish creativity and well-being. Consequently, they can dig deeper into their work, further enhancing their commitment and enriching their knowledge and expertise.

Members describe the depth and meaning of their

participation in fluctuating support networks as being intense, transformational, even life changing. Members speak of a strong desire to stay connected with individuals who have travelled with them through some tough times and to engage more deeply both professionally and personally.

The depth of these connections is often difficult to express to those outside the network and often results in their portrayal as exclusive and overly emotional, even cult-like. It is true that some networks can develop an almost tribal nature. This may be particularly evident among core members of a network as the individuals most committed to sustaining connections. This pull to a tribal affiliation may also be indicative of the level of dehumanisation that members have experienced in the organisational jungle of their workplace environment. As such, network ties may be a response to a felt need to band together for survival.

Lack of opportunity and mobility frustrate knowledge workers. While they have expertise, the layers of bureaucracy in many knowledge organisations may impede their ability to use their knowledge and experience. Without the opportunity to utilise their knowledge and expertise, they experience no new learning. Their ability to influence or make change is impeded. They sense a loss of autonomy and agency. One high-level knowledge specialist described the many layers of approval that he had to observe in the conduct of his work and commented, “I’m leaving because they have taken away the space for me to work”. Fluctuating support networks add variety and challenge, stimulating learning and creating the depth and meaning so desirable to knowledge professionals.

Fluctuating support networks offer a new organisational model where networked, lateral connections span boundaries and level voices and power differentials to build effective relationships with ***recognition and respect***. These lateral transactions seed new ideas and create an arena for growth and renewal. Networks provide “neutral yet fertile” ground for hearing and respecting diversity. Members are encouraged to express individual quirks and creativity as adding value to network interactions.

I guess I really needed the validation of a group that I am more than the narrow role I play a work. To be described as an expert, wow, that’s

humbling and gratifying all at the same time.
Amazing how that opens one up to giving even more, to exploring, sharing, learning even more, honouring the experience and expertise in each of us.

As recognition and respect for the skills of other network members accumulates, members come to know each other's strengths and limitations. They know who to access when needed and how to leverage expertise. This enables them to call on and utilise one another very effectively in advancing both individual and joint enterprise.

Rehumanising offers *safety and healing*. Fluctuating support networks are a safe place for expressing vulnerability and building confidence; they serve as a respite from organisational turbulence, providing insulation or protection in unstable environments enabling members to cope with pressures in their formal organisations. Networks provide solace, comfort and tangible support; a place where members can let down their guard and be 'real' with others who understand their stress and needs. The emotional embrace resembles a family – a place to feel comfort and reassurance when needed.

Network connectedness can also serve as an "early warning system" for members, alerting them to potential problems or changes in the organisational environment. There is safety in numbers in times of uncertainty and subterfuge. Mutual support enables members to deal with setbacks and feelings of cynicism and frustration. Having a place to go where they can share concerns and problems rehumanises their situation. Over time, networks build social capital. Through participation members earn credits, as in a mutual trust bank, which they can later draw down as needed. Like a savings account that is healthy in balance, network participation creates a sense of safety, prosperity, well-being and progress for its members – an investment in the future.

When members face tough situations, they turn to others within the network for advice and support. They need objectivity but they also need empathy and compassion. *Kindred sharing* is the passionate reciprocation that takes place at the core of a fluctuating support network. Through kindred sharing, network members bond and develop mutual respect. They are able to

share on a level that exceeds the norm in their workplace interactions.

Sharing within the safe environment of the network becomes a means of personal learning and growth. Honest opinions can be sought and offered without the potential for collateral damage to careers and reputations as might be the case in the formal organisation. Members offer mutual support through disclosure, exploration and shared understanding. Over time and with regular interaction, the sharing gradually becomes more intimate and more disclosing. This proves to be especially valuable when the situations or decisions they face require real courage. Members vent and release tensions; they move past venting to problem solving in a supportive environment.

Kindred sharing creates an easy and open environment that enables members to share ideas, generating an energy and creativity that may yield moments of epiphany-like illumination. These personal “Ahhas!” often become defining moments for the network as a whole. Through kindred sharing, members can move forward with confidence.

The Process of Rehumanising

The basic social psychological process of rehumanising includes three stages – *finding and likening*, *igniting passions* and *mutual engagement*. The finding and likening stage is a sub-core process that functions as an amplifying causal loop characterised by the development of *altruistic atmospherings*, *connectedness* and *trust*. As the level of altruistic atmospherings, connectedness and trust continues to build, or amplify, members move easily into the second stage of the rehumanising process - igniting passions. This stage has a catalytic effect on both the finding and likening stage as well as the third stage of the rehumanising process - mutual engagement. This third stage is also a sub-core process that functions as an amplifying causal loop characterised by *creativity*, *challenge*, *experimentation* and *learning*. As the catalytic middle stage, igniting passions facilitates the symbiotic relationship, continuous amplification and interdependent functioning of the sub-core processes of finding and likening and mutual engagement. Its dynamic capacity sustains the overall rehumanising process by continuously generating confidence, energy, commitment and bonding among network members.

Finding and Likening

Fluctuating support network members find each other in various ways and through disparate connections made over time. They may be introduced through mutual connections. They may find each other through reputation. Frequent interactions build connections. Members discover mutual interests and needs.

Once *reputation* and *credibility* have been established, invitations to work collaboratively are readily offered and accepted. Through *mutuality*, members develop a rhythm in relating to one another. They identify areas of agreement and alignment. The experiences they share become the basis for a developing sense of mutual values, principles and responsibilities.

Mutuality accelerates when members experience a *psychic connect* - an instant attraction where they sense that “this feels right” or “oh, you’re one of us”. Even though such encounters are generally relaxed and informal, when individuals experience such strong interpersonal chemistry, the attraction and desire to network is strong.

...we’re bumping up against each other and
recognising that we are related. We share
interests, passions, values, connections and
experiences. It’s a process of bonding...like family.

Psychic connects go beyond the intellectual. Individuals often speak of them as deep and intuitive. While members may not be able to rationalise this deeper sense of connection, they recognise it; they value the magic and the acceptance and assurance it offers.

Likening is the mutual attraction that develops between and among network members once they have found each other. It is the instinctual and emotive recognition of like minds - a recognition and excitement that creates the desire to connect and work together. Likening generates an authentic, reciprocal connection that builds respect and trust and removes the defensiveness that is so often a response to change and to new workplace situations. Likening opens conversations, reducing resistance and enabling engagement.

Dedication to a mutual purpose is important to sustaining interactions and fostering likening. The more frequent the interactions and the more open the communication, the more potential exists for building strong bonds. These attachments are

the means by which likening develops into kindred sharing.

The initial toning of network relationships facilitates likening and fosters *mutuality*. Network members often identify in each other mutual or complementary interests and skills that enable them to work comfortably together and add value to each other's work and respective reputations. A synergy develops and the association is experienced as "enjoyment and power". The desire to experience this enjoyment and power will motivate individuals to seek out or create additional opportunities for collaboration.

The likening in fluctuating support network relationships contributes to rehumanising by creating *altruistic atmospherings*, *connectedness* and *trust*. Members comment on the "magic" in network interactions in contrast to formal work groups where they feel no sense of camaraderie. They speak of the joy and the sense of belonging. Networking takes them out of day-to-day busywork and gives them a place and space to think and reflect. The esprit de corps is non-judgmental, enabling the sharing of information and diverse perspectives and generally supporting the personal and professional development of members. Members describe the atmosphere as creating real community.

Likening facilitates a *connectedness* that deepens network interaction, overcoming the sense of isolation that many knowledge workers experience. Connectedness strengthens and sustains network interactions. As connectedness builds, interaction increases and the nature of the connections change. Network bonds become sticky, creating a perpetual connectedness as single dimension sharing transcends to a deeper personal connection. The desire to maintain connections is both personal and professional. Members comment on the quality of their network relationships as being both intellectually and socially stimulating. Once authentic connections are made, the network can fluctuate without fear as members know it will persist.

The deeply personal nature of this perpetual connectedness transcends the professional level. As such, it has the potential to undermine organisational affiliations and corporate intelligence. This poses potential challenges to the management of knowledge workers and the knowledge and intellectual property to which they are privy.

Connectedness within a network does not rule out individual

work. While mutual engagement is a significant outcome of fluctuating networks, individual members continue to work independently and call upon the network when needed. Connectedness builds over time as members experience repeated opportunities for mutual engagement. Lack of opportunities for mutual engagement will restrict connectedness. There is a recognition that membership will fluctuate as some members move on and new members enter the network domain but, at the same time, there is a confidence in the network's stability once a core group has emerged. Connectedness is particularly strong within a core group.

Trust is both antecedent to likening as well as an outcome. Individuals seek out those with whom they can develop a basic level of comfort and trust. Often, there may be some commonality in terms of organisational position, professional interests, values, knowledge or skills that promotes initial sharing and facilitates further interaction. Trust is cyclic; it facilitates likening and, as also an outcome of likening, it fosters kindred sharing and bonding.

Fluctuating support networks may compensate for the chronic irritations of low trust levels within knowledge workplaces (Ganester, Schaubroeck, Sime, & Mayes, 1990). Members value deeply the trust placed in them by others in the network. They strive to validate that trust and demonstrate mutual commitment. Reciprocity of trust and commitment builds between members.

Over time, however, likening can lead to exclusivity in relationships. As network members liken, they build a repertoire of shared history that inevitably includes inside jokes and stories. This helps to bond the network and create boundaries around membership, defining who belongs and who does not. While facilitating inter-network relationships, it can serve as a barrier to those outside the network, creating resentment and feelings of exclusivity or jealousy that may work against the vitality and sustainability of the network over time.

Igniting Passions

As likening develops, passions ignite, creating energy for sustaining interaction and mutual engagement. This passion opens up possibilities and creates excitement, igniting the desire for exploration, learning and sharing. They value meeting others

who share a sense of energy and who are open to sharing their knowledge and skills. The dynamic interplay between passion and likening can feel out of control at times, but in a good way. Network members speak of reconnecting with previous dream jobs, with core values, interests and passions through their network experiences. Individual skills and abilities are stimulated by joint problem solving and collaborative creativity. The more members liken, the more passion is ignited and the more passion, the more likening is reinforced and increased.

In igniting passions, fluctuating support networks bring vocational passion into relief in an organisation. The unpredictability of their self-organising nature also creates energy. The fast pace required in responding to opportunities as they emerge creates excitement and stimulates further networking. The resultant tension is an enjoyable anxiety. Members describe it as edgy and stimulating:

What excites me is the pace of it. I like that, I like the energy it gives me and the energy it creates so I like it fast not slow.... I think it's very important. It feels like a life! Ahh.. sometimes it's too much for sure but I'll take any day of too much than too little.

The energy and synergy from mutual engagement fuel the desire to continue networking. There is a strong sense of fun, of pushing the envelope. There is little pretence or showiness in network interactions. Participation is rooted in purpose, value and meaning for those engaged. Yet, at the same time, it is fun. Members enjoy the action, the inevitable debates. In this stimulating environment, work advances and progress is made.

Igniting passions serves as the catalyst for moving a network from the process of finding and likening into the process of mutual engagement. As in the finding and likening stage, mutual engagement is also an amplifying causal loop that stimulates the catalytic effect of igniting passions while also building individual and collective confidence, re-energising mutual engagement, building commitment and reinforcing network bonds. By extension, mutual engagement also re-amplifies the finding and likening process loop thereby facilitating network sustainability.

Mutual Engagement

Members of fluctuating support networks may bring diverse backgrounds and interests but they can develop a strong desire to work together to achieve a common goal. The goal may be practice enhancement, development of a joint project or a professional collaboration. There is recognition of the range and depth of talent within the network and a desire for *mutual engagement* to leverage that capacity. There is excitement in the potential to move the group ahead and to achieve collective potential. Members treasure the experience, both for the socialisation and for the work achieved.

I also enjoyed the problem solving. I like building things, making things. So, it was both the creating something and then getting down to doing it, making it happen.

Mutual engagement through fluctuating networks enhances problem solving by offering expertise and new perspectives that individual knowledge workers may not possess. Such access can enhance the efficiency and quality of problem solving outcomes. Enhanced outcomes build both individual and collective confidence.

Fluctuating support networks keep personal and professional passions from being eroded and even depleted in the hectic humdrum of daily organisational life. Networks follow a simple principle of self-organisation as members allocate energy to follow their passions. "If no one has passion, we should not be doing it." On the other hand, attempts to force regular engagement may actually reduce network participation over time. Force produces strained participation that undermines network vitality. It ends up feeling like work.

While social connections that rehumanise are a strong motivator for network participation, the real key to sustained network participation is the interplay between fulfilling rehumanising needs and bringing tangible value to the professional development of network members. Active participation fluctuates, coalescing when need arises or mutual interest culminates but remaining latent in the interim, functioning as an intelligent subsystem that monitors and alerts members of a call to action. Engagement is readily mobilised when opportunity or need is expressed by one or more members.

Mutual engagement provides the arena for the release of collective *creativity*. It offers *challenge*, *experimentation* and *learning*. Mutual engagement builds *confidence*, *commitment* and *energy*. It enhances the *bonding* of network members.

The passions that ignite in a fluctuating support network spark *creativity*. Argument and debate also ignite passions in networks. Such intensity generates the creativity and problem solving power of the collective mindset in a network. It's part of the fluctuating nature of the network.

You can do creative things. You can do interesting things and you don't have to be doing routine stuff.... It's the excitement of creating something new. I think that really matters to each of us....
It's what we share.

Fluctuating support networks *challenge* members to give their best. There is an expectation to do so and the support for stretching oneself. There is respect for taking a stand and challenging others in the network as well. Members recognise their personal power in challenging themselves and others and they develop a level of comfort in doing so more readily.

... it's the fun of it, the challenge of it... so you ask me why I say vibrant, I think at times, just scratching our heads about how we're going to do this... what's going to work, won't this work, what are we doing... so, it's just like creativeness, I think that's what ... as I look back on this... that was the charge in it.

Part of the value of networking is attributed to being tested and being able to sustain the effort by mixing the hard work with fun. Members express their enjoyment in the social and intellectual stimulation of networking but occasionally admit to feeling challenged intellectually. This is the stretch that fluctuating support networks can offer. The slogging actually serves to bond network members. While there is always a fear of failure mixed with the potential high of success. The higher the stakes; the greater the passion. Members thrive on that feeling of being on the edge. The challenge of risk and achievement can be very empowering. Success is sweetest when shared.

Fluctuating support networks also provide opportunities for

experimentation, as places to try new things, to learn new skills, to have fun and to move past the strictures of formal organisational environments. Members describe their networks as practice fields where they are able to stretch their boundaries and take risks in an environment of trust. They speak of bringing what they have been exploring “out there” into the network, of testing assumptions. Ideas percolate throughout the network. Members are open to trying something new. They are not intimidated by the potential for making mistakes. It is seen as preferable to make a mistake than to do nothing. The atmosphere is open for experimentation and thereby innovation.

... because of the charting of new ground... we had to figure out a lot of stuff... there was nothing to go on... there was no model to adopt or emulate... We blew a lot of things... things we didn't do well but, nonetheless, it was trying to sort them through that was the fun. And having a real success, yeah... that would keep us going.

Collaborative creativity is increasingly important in complex knowledge work. Siloed knowledge workers find such networks an invaluable venue for experimentation. The more specialised their expertise or independent their work roles, the more valuable network opportunities become.

Individual passion for *learning* is stimulated and reinforced in a network. There is a strong sense of collective wisdom resident and accessible within the membership. Access to expertise that enhances learning is a powerful motivator for participation. Within networks, established participants mentor new members by sharing their knowledge and expertise. The altruistic atmosphere enables open sharing of ideas and concerns and fosters respect for a diversity of perspectives. The opportunity to learn together is both enjoyable and valuable. Learning transcends the individual to encompass the collective. Network members coach each other in applying new learning and maintain an interest in each other's progress.

The learning that results from taking on new challenges within a network adds depth and meaning to work. Restless organisational spirits are sated by continuous opportunities for reciprocal learning and sharing, getting past disengagement and

non-performance, reminding individuals of when they “had a real hunger for their work”.

Networking builds individual and group *confidence* by fulfilling both ego and achievement needs. Confidence builds as network members pursue opportunities to test themselves. The testing may be of skill, knowledge or values. Confidence builds *commitment*.

I knew it was time to stand up and be counted. I
also saw the impact we had by voicing our
concerns, making recommendations and
ultimately making things happen.

Members view their networks as a means to facilitate their commitment to personal and professional growth. Commitment comes from the depth and meaning of interaction. It feeds a passion that is shared by members and sustains network participation.

Tremendous *energy* is generated through fluctuating support network connections. Members describe their participation as revitalising. There is an infectious lunacy to the interaction, to the give and take. The adrenaline fix of igniting passions energizes network members and leaves them wanting more. Once established, the energy of network interactions can sustain a network. Even the removal or fading away of core or initial members will not threaten continuation of the network if the energy is there.

The passion that brings network members together is also the glue that bonds the network. Trust is the moderating factor in network *bonding*. Through sustained mutual engagement, ready trust is established within the network, facilitating participation in additional collaborative ventures. Once members have bonded, they stay connected even though they may move off into new organisations. There is an attraction to staying connected and to sustaining trusted bonds. It is a desire to re-experience the energy and excitement of the network connection.

Implications for Management Practice

This study contributes to management praxis by raising awareness and offering insights into the practical value of fluctuating support networks as psychological infrastructure for rehumanising knowledge work. As an informal response to the

formal organisation, fluctuating support networks deviate from the conventions of the formal organisation, providing network members with a venue for fulfilling unmet social and psychological work-related needs. Knowledge and understanding of such networks may enable managers to understand their functionality in resolving knowledge workers' concerns and needs in response to persistent and unpredictable change and may offer managers an additional resource for achieving strategic organisational goals, especially those goals that require cross-functional integration and non-conventional perspectives to address increasingly complex organisational problems. Adopting the basic social process of rehumanising as a conceptual framework may assist managers and human resource professionals in developing organisational strategies that support a broader humanistic paradigm.

In particular, the theory of fluctuating support networks offers valuable insights on several issues of specific significance to management praxis in knowledge-based organisations:

Learning and Innovation

Much of the challenge in knowledge work is the quest for innovation through complex problem solving. In contrast to routine work, innovative work requires scope for experimentation and flexibility of structures and operations (Szeto, 2000; Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbeck, 1973). Leveraging knowledge and wisdom is widely recognised as the key to competitive advantage and even organisational survival, yet this intangible asset is not readily accessible through the traditional channels of the formal organisation (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

By serving as venues for creative, imaginative and unconventional thinking, fluctuating support networks offer knowledge workers a practice field for the experimentation and flexibility that enables innovation. Rehumanising through fluctuating support networks re-ignites passion for creative engagement, offsetting the anxiety often associated with learning and change (Schein, 1992). The process of mutual engagement facilitates the creative process, building confidence while incubating innovative ideas until opportunities arise to introduce them into the formal organisation. From an organisational perspective, fluctuating support networks can be viewed as an emergent self-organising parallel learning system (Bushe and

Shani, 1991) that operates not as a replacement for, but as an informal supplement to the formal organisation, preparing the ground for learning in organisations by promoting co-operative peer group inquiry for both support and challenge (Reason, 1999). By building trustful relationships over time, networks can enhance organisational learning (Floren & Tell, 2004).

Job Security, Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention has emerged as a significant human resource management challenge, ahead of compensation and opportunity for advancement (Galt, 2003). The rise of non-standard work arrangements have increased perceived job insecurity (Parker, 1994), leading to job dissatisfaction and reducing organisational commitment which, in turn, can result in increased employee turnover (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1991). The lack of a secure employment relationship creates a sense of alienation and loss of meaning in the workplace. Mobility and turnover in organisations may be moderated by secure anchorage in a primary group that supports the beliefs, feelings and ideas of members (Bennis, Berkowitz, Affinito, & Malone, 1968). Fluctuating support networks, particularly intra-organisational networks, may well serve as affinity groups offering a sense of belonging and security to organisational members.

Loyalty and Commitment

A requirement for sustaining any social system is a degree of loyalty by its members and any threat to the system enhances this requirement (Gouldner, 1968). At the same time, the naturally cosmopolitan nature of highly specialised knowledge workers will promote their engagement in fluctuating support networks external to their organisations and thus potentially place them in positions of being recruited away. A suggested strategy is that of deepening the involvement of highly skilled workers within the organisation to engender a sense of local loyalty (Glaser, 1968). This local loyalty does not have to embrace the organisation as a whole. Loyalty may exist at many levels. Loyalty to a small work unit or an informal internal network may be sufficient to sustain commitment to the formal organisation. Thus, the existence of fluctuating support networks within the organisation may substantially support local loyalties, even in times of organisational threat or uncertainty.

Such membership is a way of reconceptualising the psychological contract between individuals and their organisations, with knowledge workers holding twin citizenship within the organisation and within their smaller work units (Handy, 1994). Loyalty to smaller units fosters liberty, incentive and initiative, while loyalty to the organisation mitigates duplication, inefficiency and misunderstanding. Fluctuating support networks offer knowledge workers a source of continuity and connection that many indicate they no longer experience in their organisations. Managers would be wise to leverage this subsidiary contribution while focusing organisational efforts on developing the third sense that knowledge workers espouse in their search for meaning in their work – that of direction or mission (Handy, 1994).

Employee Involvement and Productivity

Employee involvement is crucial to knowledge organisations, as effort remains largely discretionary in knowledge work (Belanger, 2000). The concept of workplace democracy gives workers more autonomy and control over their work and their work environments (Semler, 1994, 2004). At the same time, it is worth noting that the move to greater involvement of non-managerial workers in the organisation and co-ordination of work may contribute to work intensification (Belanger, 2000). Fluctuating support networks enable a degree of self-organisation, autonomy and control for knowledge workers while also moderating potentially stressful impacts of work intensification.

Stress and Satisfaction at Work

Workers in high-strain jobs have higher rates of disease than their counterparts in low-strain jobs. In fact, health care expenditures are nearly fifty per cent greater for workers who report high levels of stress. Stress can also result in increased absenteeism and decline in productivity (Williams, 2003).

Organisations that demand next to nothing of individuals can alienate and repress creative ability; but organisations that demand everything of individuals destroy autonomy and particularity with questionable demands made on an individual's time, psychic stability and social development (Leitche & van Hattem, 2000).

... most often the sources of disengagement from a job don't involve salary and benefits, but things that managers do have control over, such as providing challenge, meaningful work and opportunities to learn and gain recognition. (Immen, 2004)

Rehumanising through fluctuating support networks holds both healing and revitalising potential for knowledge workers. Participation enables knowledge workers to better manage the stressful impact of a dehumanised workplace environment, establish supportive relationships and re-ignite their passion and energy for work. The residual benefit to the formal organisation should serve as sufficient incentive for any manager to develop an understanding of the significant role and value that fluctuating support networks offer for rehumanising knowledge work.

Methodological Notes

The individuals who participated in this study were drawn from a range of public and professional sectors including secondary and post secondary education, nursing, medicine, social work, corporate training and development and management consultancy. Consistent with the parameters offered by Brint (2001) and Pyroria (2005) to define knowledge work and knowledge workers, the work of study participants requires the creative and innovative application of expert knowledge to the solution of organisationally contingent issues. Such issues routinely emerge as a result of persistent change and the application of new technologies and work processes that demand continuous adaptation, learning and collaborative problem solving. In summary, 61 individuals participated in the study; 27 through personal interviews with an additional 34 individuals participating in focus group sessions. These data sources were augmented with additional data from participant observations and casual conversations with knowledge workers as opportunities arose during the course of the study.

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