

In our era, it's impossible to overemphasize the necessity of being an elite knowledge worker. Not just a good worker. Not just a knowledge worker. No, the target is to be an *elite* knowledge worker. But just what does "being an elite knowledge worker" mean? Let's pick that up with one of the greatest knowledge workers of the last hundred years, in fact, the very person who coined the term "knowledge worker." Peter Drucker is uniquely known as the Father of Modern Management, and with good reason.

But let's start at the beginning. Born under the fading heyday of Austria's Habsburg dynasty across Europe, Drucker's early adult years coincided with the rise of Hitler and the Nazis. Like many amazing thinkers of his generation from Germany and Austria during that time—such as the famous physicist Edward Teller and the towering philosopher Eric Voegelin—Drucker ended up emigrating and thriving in America.

But what really gave Drucker a jump start in his life was that his immediate family's home in Austria was where many top people in various fields routinely gathered—scientists, lawyers, doctors, professors, and philosophers—and, even as a teenager, Drucker was encouraged to mix it up with all of them. Most interesting, in retrospect, was that three of the most influential, clear-eyed economists of the entire 20th century were frequent visitors to the Drucker home: Ludwig von Mises, Joseph Schumpeter, and Friedrich Hayek. Now that's amazing—many astute people today would covet just the idea of meeting one of these unique thinkers—and Peter Drucker had routine access to all three of these giants and to their thinking.

After moving to America, Drucker gained fame in the early 1940s, after being given unparalleled access to one of the most dominant manufacturing firms in America, General Motors, from the factory floors to management discussions to board meetings, by then writing his critical observations and opinions in the pioneering book *Concept of the Corporation*. Unsurprisingly, Drucker's opinions were intensely disliked by GM executives, including famous CEO Alfred Sloan, for whom the elite MIT Sloan School of Management is named. Being a confident knowledge worker himself, Drucker clearly was not intimidated by GM's elite.

Drucker went on to become extremely influential. Sought-after thinker and consultant. Author of numerous articles and 39 books, including what is likely the most widely used management textbook in America ever. Major influencer of numerous business and nonprofit executives over many decades. Recipient of 25 honorary doctorates. And recipient of the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Amidst the prosperous growth of the second half of the 20th century, Drucker not only informed countless readers, he poked and prodded many leaders out of their comfort zones to become better, sometimes much better. His ideas were not perfect or always easily adoptable, but his batting average for hitting substantive hits over many decades was remarkable.

And one of his best home runs was his early perception of the coming age of the "knowledge worker," publishing that idea conceptually in 1959 simply as "knowledge work" and then continuously developing it deeper and deeper into "knowledge workers" discussions over the next several decades, going all the way to a more comprehensive macro idea: the "shift to a knowledge society." And that trend is indeed working to reshape our world today. But there are some complications.

Early on, the distinction as to just who was a knowledge worker fell, in the minds of many, as a simple contrast between white-collar managers and blue-collar workers doing more physical, muscular, repetitive tasks. And that understanding may have been reasonably accurate from, say, the 1950s to the 1970s, when General Electric, General Mills and General Motors were emblematic of the U.S. economy.

But, beginning in the late 70s and then clearly escalating over a couple of decades, the era of ubiquitous personal computers prevailed via leaders like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs and the likes of Andy Grove doing processors at Intel and a twenty-something Marc Andreessen co-authoring the first widely-used browser.

Fax machines, PCs, and spreadsheets wormed their way into business life, top to bottom. And, the internet started making serious inroads throughout the 1990s. Knowledge levels were increasing dramatically in industry sectors like medical procedures, pharmaceuticals, defense, agriculture—virtually no major industry was untouched by meaningful innovation, technology advancements, challenges, and disruption.

Then, beginning at the turn of the 21st century, what seemed like a lot of change the previous years now seemed slow. Huge advancements in connectivity, cell phones, networks, platforms, apps, speed, storage, software development, service levels, process improvements—the changes were deep, integrative, and never-ending. The long-standing, leading U.S. giants in stock market value like ExxonMobil, Walmart, and General Electric? Fully displaced at the very top recently—by Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook and Google—that displacement driven by essentially new company-level strategies or newly configured platforms that were barely understood or perceived to be relevant in the early 1990s, let alone dominant.

So all that has rolled dramatically through the U.S. economy. And China's innovators were doing much the same with Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu. In this way, knowledge-worker strategies spread throughout those two economies as platforms like Amazon and Alibaba elevated opportunities for small business people and innovative partners. As Marc Andreessen, the browser-guy now a highly successful venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, famously wrote a few years ago, "Software is eating the world."

So now, at the individual level, a department head or an executive is not, just by default, a knowledge worker. You see, being an elite knowledge worker is not just about being on top yesterday or today, it's about the evergreen target beyond today: keeping on top—continuously—with the latest in innovation and integrative change up and down the supply chain and operations in any particular industry. And that truth applies to all workers! Nowadays, for example, a great automobile mechanic who is committed to continually mastering the latest technological diagnostics—that mechanic is an elite knowledge worker!

You being a great accountant, or tech expert, or marketer, or manager is the same. Are you re-mastering your area of expertise, especially through rapid change? There is precious little that the 50-year-old...or even the 35-year-old...can count on for carrying them through the turbulent change ahead over the next decades. And just like the six-year-old skier whizzing down the slopes, the twenty-somethings are teched-up, ready, and willing to do the job an older worker is lagging on...for half-price! Not funny, but true...

For even my freshmen business students at university, I constantly emphasize that a business degree, however valuable, clearly cannot carry them for a long time, let alone a career. Graduates should expect to constantly learn massive amounts of new material, practices, skills, and work techniques. So I make sure that a key verbal exchange happens in class many times—very soon, these students are literally finishing my sentence. I say, "You must become a _____ ." "Knowledge worker," they chant, grinning. But it's deadly serious business to expect to use God's gifting to the maximum. This truth about being a knowledge-worker, if taken seriously, may well be the most valuable takeaway in any curriculum!

But *actually being* an elite, evergreening knowledge-worker requires a mindset. That is critical! *Then*, it requires a commitment, a real commitment to work to be not just the greatest now, but the future versions of greatest, integrating multiple disciplines and data points in an increasingly complex world.

All that requires losing a sense of entitlement that spending years in your industry used to unquestionably count toward. Because now, a deadly entitlement mentality is going to spiral its proud owner downwards amidst new software, new processes, new platforms, new regulations...and a new replacement.

Peter Drucker, the ultimate knowledge worker who coined the term itself, productively worked past the age of 90! Be like Drucker—don't be a victim by allowing your gifting to have a shortened lifespan! Practice and master evergreening your status as an elite knowledge-worker! That's being a great steward for God!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Is your workplace enterprise positioned well with regard to the necessary, elite knowledge workers in order to thrive well into the future? What are you doing as a leader to ensure this?
2. How does the clear importance of knowledge-worker contributions tie in to a Christian's multiple stewardships: stewardship of the believer's giftings, stewardship of his or her appointed role at work, stewardship of the gospel? Be specific.
3. Are you fully positioned now—and poised for the future—with regard to being an elite knowledge worker in all your roles, personal and professional? What strategies have you put in place to accomplish this?