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ORGANIZATIONS AS RHETORIC: KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE FIRMS AND THE STRUGGLE WITH AMBIGUITY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concepts of knowledge-intensive workers and firms. The functional view is questioned and a perspective on knowledge as institutionalized myth and rationality-surrogate is proposed. The ambiguity of knowledge work is emphasized and it is argued that a crucial dimension of a knowledge-intensive organization concerns the struggle with this ambiguity, which leads to efforts to refine various rhetorical strategies. Besides those stressing knowledge, science and rationality, the article points to rhetoric describing employees in knowledge-intensive firms as possessing other personal qualities and orientations than personnel employed in bureaucracies.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the knowledge-intensive organization (knowledge company) has rapidly attained very large interest during recent years (Alvesson, 1993a; Blackler *et al.*, 1992; Hedberg, 1990; Lindmark, 1990; Starbuck, 1992; Sveiby and Risling, 1986, *etc.*).

This development can be understood in various ways. The most common, as well as commonsensical, explanation emphasizes actual changes in society, work and organizations which supposedly means that 'knowledge' becomes more important, that the number and significance of 'knowledge-intensive' organizations increase and/or that 'knowledge-intensity' in organizations and work in general increases in the modern economy. The correctness of such a thesis is less self-evident than may appear at first glance, particularly if one does not reserve the word 'knowledge' purely for formal, theoretically based and broadly acknowledged versions as a base for competence and applications, but defines it more broadly and includes also knowledge of craftsmanship and other skills.

'Objective' changes do not stand in a one-to-one relationship to words, concepts and proposed images, and it is not self-evident that we need a concept or category of the 'knowledge-intensive' in management and organization theory, at least, not associated with a wish to mirror the 'nature' of the contemporary organizations. Other kinds of needs may originate in the

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wishes of consultants and academics to launch new selling concepts (*cf.* Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988) or in wishes of managers and other employees in particular kinds of organizations to adopt concepts that help them in their struggles with identity and image problems. Knowledge contains such a strong symbolic value that it can easily create biases when discussed, which motivates an extra dose of scepticism when accounting for it.

Another reason for the interest in talking about knowledge-intensive organizations is connected to the fate of the notion of professions and professional organizations. In addition to the original professions – physicians, lawyers and priests – an increase in occupations founded in higher education but which do not correspond to strong criteria for being named a 'profession', have taken place during recent decades. Accountants, advertising workers, architects, computer experts, engineers, management consultants and psychologists have increased in numbers. The old criteria for distinguishing professionals from non-professionals have been seriously weakened. According to a strict definition – where a profession should be characterized by a systematic, scientifically-based theory, long formal education, autonomy, ethical rules, a distinct occupational culture, client-orientation, socially sanctioned and authorized – only physicians and perhaps dentists, vets and psychologists would qualify as true professionals, while, for example, priests and lawyers hardly base their work on science-based theory. The arbitrariness of where to draw the line between a profession and a non-profession and the, in many cases, unfounded, significance laid upon official recognition, a professional body and a formalized code of ethics, means that there is space for a concept or a category that can illuminate occupations characterized by long formal education and the traits that normally accompany this – prestige, work tasks broadly perceived as complicated and high salaries – as well as organizations with a significant number of employees with these features.

It does not seem reasonable to see law and accounting firms – the most commonly recognized professional companies – as distinct from architectural, management or computer consultancy firms or advertising agencies in terms of most organizational aspects. Of course, one can use the concept of a professional organization more widely than a traditional or strict definition of a profession allows (and many have done so), but it may be a good idea to bypass the idea of the profession – even broadly defined – altogether and direct attention to something else, perhaps 'knowledge-intensive' work and firms.

This article addresses this category broadly, but a certain emphasis is laid upon knowledge-intensive firms, especially in the service sector (in which the majority of these firms operate).

ON PROFESSIONS AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE

Older literature, in particular, but also more recent texts, describe the professions in such a way that one almost suspects that members of the PR departments of the professions concerned had produced them. The central

role of science and knowledge, autonomy, the solving of problems vital to society, affective neutrality and altruistic service to clients was often emphasized, producing an 'image of a largely autonomous, self-regulating and self-perpetuating institution, the altruistic members of which are filled with a desire to work for the common good in the most effective way' (Brante, 1988, p.122). Contemporary views in the sociology of professions are far more sceptical to the claim that professionals are the carriers of a higher form of rationality and morality than other social groups (Fores *et al.*, 1991; Selander, 1989).

Professionals' statements about themselves and, to some extent, researchers' reproductions of such statements, can be understood as elements in their strategies for achieving and maintaining the status of a profession. In line with modern sociology of professions, it is rather *claims* about having these particular traits that motivate a specific social position and certain privileges, including monopoly of segments of the labour market that are of interest (Torstendahl, 1989). 'Essentialist' ideas – stressing universal qualities of professions – have become increasingly unpopular while an emphasis on professionalization strategies and processes, *i.e.* efforts to gain recognition as a profession and attain monopoly on certain types of jobs, have been put more into focus (Selander, 1989). Self-interest and efforts to attain social closure – preventing other people from the right to certain jobs or tasks – is crucial for professions.

The politics and rhetoric of professions are put into focus. An ethical code, for example, is better seen as a symbolic vehicle which supports the political interests of the profession than as a set of norms that safeguard a morally superior behaviour of the professionals. The myths of technocracy, certain knowledge, altruism, rationality and neutrality are seen as ideologies for justificatory purposes (Brante, 1988). This kind of changing focus is relevant also for the study of knowledge-intensive firms, organizations and worker (KIFOWs) (sometimes I address this broad category when arguments and points are not just restricted to the company, organizational or worker level).

According to Fores *et al.* (1991, p.97), traditional understanding of professionals means that

> We are lulled into a sense of false scientificity: specialism, rationality, and scientific predictability allay the uncertainties of the human condition. But:
> – applying knowledge is a highly incomplete account of what professionals do;
> – there is no cut off point between professional jobs and other jobs; applying knowledge is an element in many occupations;
> – the knowledge being applied does not for the most part partake of the Newtonian quality;
> – close association with knowledge/science does not make human actors themselves scientific or rational;
> – the focus on knowledge-rationality-predictability of outcomes distracts from the more important qualities of skill, creativity, judgement, and *savoir faire*, and the constructive response to the uncertain and unprogrammable.

To some extent these points reinforce a move from professional to knowledge-intensive organizations. The latter implicates, for example, no cut-off point between two categories (those with and without knowledge), but indicates a looser categorization, the idea being that some jobs and organizations call for more (formal) knowledge (longer education for the personnel) than others. On the whole, this critique of a naïve view on the professions and the adoption of a more sceptical, if not cynical position (Brante, 1988), is necessary, otherwise, conceptions about KIFOWs just take over highly idealized views about professionals and the nature of knowledge.

ON KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE ORGANIZATIONS

The notion of knowledge and knowledge-intensive as a base for identifying a group of workers or organizations (dominated by so-called knowledge workers) is thus not without serious problems. To define knowledge in a non-abstract and non-sweeping way seems to be extremely difficult. Knowledge easily becomes everything and nothing (see, for example, Wikström *et al.*, 1993).

Freidson (quoted in Burris, 1993) says that professionals are 'the agents of formal knowledge'. The significance of formal knowledge and formal education should not, however, as the citation of Fores *et al.* (1991) suggests, be overestimated. Many professionals and other highly educated people acquire qualifications after the termination of their formal education and other knowledge workers are even less dependent on formal education. More important criteria are skills that are in demand, relatively esoteric and hard to attain for the common person, and are associated with high prestige and comparatively high financial rewards (Brante, 1989; Starbuck, 1992). A problem is that the evaluation of knowledge-intensiveness becomes too dependent on market mechanisms and on social changes. Knowledge-intensiveness can not be measured solely against short-term commercial criteria.

Esoteric expertise presupposes that something different and much more original than that which can be acquired through formal education is crucial, while the education system, with a few exceptions, can provide people with only a standardized knowledge.

A key characteristic for KIFs is said to be the capacity to solve complex problems through creative and innovative solutions (*e.g.* Hedberg, 1990; Sveiby and Risling, 1986). However, creativity stands in an ambiguous relation to formal knowledge. One could argue that pure knowledge and creativity to some extent are contradictory. In artistic work, formal knowledge is not so crucial and in many jobs which demand long higher education, a body of systematic knowledge is more useful than the invention of something new. Physicians are rarely supposed to be very creative. Creativity could even be said to be something that is needed when knowledge is insufficient, and when we have enough knowledge we don't have to be creative. This point should not be carried too far – formal knowledge may

often provide the base for creativity, as in research – but nevertheless it illustrates that knowledge should not be seen as the only qualification.

Among other candidates for the label 'knowledge' other than formal, theoretical knowledge are cultural and somatic knowledge. Cultural knowledge represents a prerequisite for the ability to master a particular symbolic and value environment, to decipher the cultural codes and manoeuvre freely in a social setting, is necessary for social successful behaviour (Bourdieu, 1979; Swidler, 1986). Somatic knowledge, in the body internalized dispositions, may appear as a way beyond 'knowledge' but is nevertheless included in some overviews of this object of study (Crick, 1982).

The problem with the idea of knowledge-intensity is that it is very difficult to know where and when to stop including elements. Formalized, theoretical knowledge represents one pole; cultural, interpersonnel, somatic and other forms of tacit knowledge, together with creative skills and talents, represent the other. As a meaningful category, the first covers too little (even though I stick to it in this article), the second far too much.

If one does not define knowledge as the number of years of education and formal training – which appears mechanical and reductionistic – it is rather difficult to compare different workers and sort out who is the most knowledgeable. Can one compare a heart surgeon to a bus driver in terms of who needs or has 'most' knowledge? One could say the surgeon only has to know about a rather limited area of work, while a good bus driver must know the geography of the city, the vehicle, how to cope with passengers in a variety of situations, *etc.* and that comparisons are impossible or meaningless. Even a comparison between a physician and a nurse does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the former has or needs 'more knowledge' if social and practical types of knowledge are considered.

The problem becomes even greater when one goes from the individual to the organizational level. Some authors want to extend knowledge from a property of the personnel, to include something that can be located in organizations (manuals, routines), products or cultures (Bonora and Revang, 1993; Starbuck, 1992). Another version is to emphasize the knowledge-intensiveness of the management of a company. It is thus the knowledge of the strategic core and the technostructure – to use Mintzberg's (1983) concepts – rather than the average employee that is in focus. Against the slogan that service and industrial companies solve simple problems, while knowledge-intensive companies solve complex problems, one could argue that, for example, most consultancy or research work (and the management of it) is simple compared to the running of an airway, a car manufacturer or even a MacDonald chain (*cf.* Gummesson, 1990).

Many authors acknowledge that knowledge is very difficult to define but treat it nevertheless as a robust and substantial capacity which can produce 'good results'. A knowledge intensive organization is thus a firm that can produce exceptionally good results through the help of outstanding expertise. Starbuck (1992) suggests for example that 'to make the KIF a useful category, one has to require that exceptional expertise make important contributions'. Ekstedt (1990, p.21) claims that 'knowledge companies . . . supply the large corporations and the various public public agencies and other institutions

with the knowledge they need to solve problems of various kinds'. He believes that the 'knowledge factor becomes increasingly important ... and will gradually take over the influential position previously enjoyed by real capital' (p.21). Some authors talk about 'storing' knowledge (Bonora and Revang, 1993).

Against these uncomplicated and reified understandings of knowledge, one can point to the uncertainties and controversies characterizing a lot of science (Brante, 1988) as well as to the fact that whatever the relative degree of rationality characterizing science and formal knowledge, people in their functioning are much less rational (Fores *et al.*, 1991). Few knowledge-workers operate according to a handbook on scientific methodology. These two uncertainties makes the impact of the 'knowledge-factor' or esoteric expertise much less clear-cut in practice.

In addition to such counterpoints to the robust, functionalist view on knowledge one can argue that (a) it is extremely difficult to isolate and point to 'knowledge' as a particular factor that is in itself important and (b) KIF's successes are more contingent upon more-or-less loose *beliefs* about them being able to offer something specific to clients. Instead of an objectivistic and functionalist understanding of knowledge and knowledge-intensity a social constructivist or institutionalist position can be explored (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1987).

Moving the focus in this way does not negate the idea that there are core forms of knowledge which various people and organizations may possess to different degrees. Social constructions which are also material constructions may occasionally break down – as is sometimes the case with bridges and space shuttles. In most knowledge-intensive firms – such as law firms, accounting firms, advertising agencies, consultancy organizations, schools – 'raw' or 'naked' natural or material reality does not form a crucial input to beliefs and understandings concerning the 'objective' knowledge that these organizations posess.

We can thus take seriously the idea that not only knowledge in itself is ambiguous but also that it is highly ambiguous what role this 'factor' plays in most KIFOWs. This move is quite different from traditional views on professions and contemporary functionalist writings about KIFs in which ambiguity has been denied or downplayed while protoganists of the professions have stressed that these practitioners '... are applying knowledge, acting rationally, deploying trained and specialized competence. All this serves to take the sting out of the disorderly, threateningly ambiguous character of social experience' (Fores *et al.*, 1991, p.97).

As Martin and Meyerson (1988) say, it is vital to acknowledge rather than deny ambiguity. This lesson is particularly fruitful for students of KIFs. Ambiguity, (involving uncertainty, contradictions that can not be resolved or reconciled, absence on agreement on boundaries, clear principles or solutions), then, is seen as a crucial element in work and organization (Feldman, 1991; Meyerson, 1991). Ambiguity is different from uncertainty while it cannot be clarified just through gathering more facts. Ambiguity means that the possibility of rationality – clarifying means–ends relationships or exercising qualified judgement – becomes seriously reduced. Thereby a space is

created for what Meyer and Rowan (1977) call the adoption of institutionalized myths.

KNOWLEDGE AS INSTITUTIONALIZED MYTH

The idea of Meyer and Rowan (1977) that 'institutionalized products, services, techniques, policies, and programs function as powerful myths' which many organizations adopt 'ceremonially', appears to have a particular significance for understanding workers and organizations that tend to be labelled 'knowledge-intensive'.

Meyer and Rowan argue that formal organizations 'are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society' which leads to the conclusion that they 'dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities' (p.304). The myths of these environments have two key properties: they are rationalized and impersonal prescriptions which identify various social purposes as technical ones and they specify means to pursue these purposes, and they are highly institutionalized, *i.e.* are taken-for-granted as legitimate.

These rationalized myths exercise a strong impact on formal organizations, which are obliged to respond through developing the 'right' structures, including professions, programmes and technologies. Organizations 'must' have, for example, personnel departments and functionaries, management development programmes and modern technologies, otherwise legitimacy problems arise. Meyer and Rowan thus seem to work with a metaphor of organizations as mirrors or containers of institutionally-defined rationalized myths. Adaptation to myths has very little to do with efficiency, Meyer and Rowan suggest. There is a decoupling of matters of efficient co-ordination and control of productive activities and of responding to institutional issues in order to attain legitimacy.

The myths are meanings ascribed to rather concrete phenomena such as education, professions, scientific disciplines and certain techniques. The adaption of these brings about confidence and good faith, internally and externally.

Myths in the case of Meyer and Rowan then appear as a kind of *rationality-surrogate*. Taken-for-granted beliefs compensate for the absence of 'true rationality' – (which follows from the ambiguities involved, especially the difficulties in establishing clear means–ends linkages and from the existence of a large number of centres in society which develop various versions, some of which some become institutionalized, of what is in the service of reason and the social good.

Meyer and Rowan's ideas have special relevance for the 'knowledge-intensive'. Most of their examples can be attributed to this category. Knowledge-intensive work and products can seldom be seen as contributing to technical efficiency in a strict sense. Their contributions are taken for granted and they score high on legitimacy.

Knowledge-intensive organizations – with a few exceptions – can thus be

viewed as providers of these institutionalized myths. Their task is to offer products and services to other organizations so that these conform to the institutionalized expectations of their environments. Two important elements are involved here. One is the products and services in themselves, which then are adapted and 'used' in the organization adopting the 'correct' techniques or programmes. Another is the utilization of organizations and professionals broadly recognized as carriers of advanced knowledge. To use or be connected to agents which are highly visible and sanctioned in terms of knowledge and expertise is important in adapting to the institutional environment in the contemporary Western world. Knowledge-intensive service organizations thus become vital symbols for client organizations' elaboration of rules and requirements for rationality. The well-run company utilizes expertise from recognized knowledge-intensive firms for education, personnel recruitment, management development, computer development projects, market research, advertising, auditing, managerial advice, strategic planning, *etc.* External as well as internal faith is thereby created.

An implication of this is that the focus changes from an emphasis on formal knowledge to persuasive strategies in convincing all concerned about expertise and superior rationality, as a KIFOW is governed by and can contribute to the benefits of the clients. Knowledge or core competence is still vital, but this becomes rather a matter of knowledge for the sake of being socially recognized as an expert, *i.e.* knowledge about how to act in an 'expert-like' way. The persuasive or rhetorical element then is vital. Being perceived as an expert is then more crucial than being one.

KNOWLEDGE AS A LIMITED ELEMENT IN THE WORK OF 'KNOWLEDGE WORKERS'

The role of knowledge as such is also circumscribed by the work that many employees in KIFs are doing. To say that their work content primarily is to develop and/or apply advanced knowledge appears as rather idealized and in many cases gives a biased picture of what is really going on. Drawing attention to the legitimation aspect does not add much to our understanding of what KIFOWs actually do, which is even more significant than what they know (Blackler, this issue). Surprisingly few studies have looked more carefully at what professionals and KIFs do at work.

In a study of the work of psychologists and architects Svensson (1990a) found a discrepancy between the rational model of knowledge and the uncertainty, complexity, instability and unicity that characterize their everyday work. On questions concerning the knowledge tools they use in their work, the psychologists and architects interviewed had difficulty in coming up with examples in which they rationally apply theoretical knowledge. They implicitly question the rational, technical model of knowledge which they, in other situations, outside everyday work, espouse and which their professions historically have been eager to put forward.

In a study of social workers Meyerson (1991) found that

> Individual social workers experience ambiguity in their structures, including their boundaries, technologies, goals, and evaluation criteria. . . . Thus insiders, as well as outsiders, hold diffuse ideas about what social work is and about who is and is not a social worker (p.136).

Formal knowledge seems to play a quite limited role in their work.

In a case study of a computer consultancy firm it was found that managers and employees often downplayed the role of technical expertise in their work (Alvesson, 1993a). The work tasks varied a lot and often people were assigned to jobs for which they had very little formal education or relevant experience. Of course, this capacity to adapt to various contexts and tasks is an important part of consultants' skill, but it is a bit different from the application of a specialized set of knowledge. As one consultant expressed it:

> What I am selling is flexibility, the capacity to absorb knowledges and apply them. I can quickly see the context, make abstract evaluations, see the client's problem and do something about it.

My impression is that, for example, psychology and management consultants often work with a broad set of different tasks. A greater part of their work has little to do with narrow expertise and more to do with experience in adapting to new situations. For consultants it is important to be (and to be perceived as) committed, persistent, able to cope with uncertainty and strain, to have interpersonnel skills, to communicate, develop and maintain contacts, *etc.* Perhaps subjective orientations and person-bound talents such as these are more significant than formal knowledge and specialized work-role experiences and skills in most consultancy organizations.

Another important point regards the use of consultants as 'grey labour'. Quite often, client companies use consultants as additional labour to cope with peaks in work load. Even though the work done still may be relatively qualified – *e.g.* programming work or teaching supervisors in leadership – it hardly involves 'esoteric expertise'. On the whole, it is not unlikely that a large part of the work of KIFOWs is not very complicated and so blurs the distinction between 'labour' and 'knowledge'.

To say that the work of professionals and other KIFOWs is only, or even mainly, the direct or 'creative' application of a systematic, institutionalized body of formal knowledge or esoteric expertise may be misleading. Knowledge is thus not necessarily so significant in work.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF THE WORK RESULTS

A third vital aspect of much of knowledge-intensive work concerns the ambiguities of the results produced. Persistent uncertainty is by definition a part of the area in which most professionals and other KIWs are operating. Fields of action with low uncertainty or where the knowledge required to evaluate problems and solutions are easily accessible do not provide the space necessary for the development of socially recognized expertise (Beckman,

1989). This means that the work results also are very difficult to evaluate, at least for those outside the sphere of experts concerned, and in practice such expert evaluations rarely take place. Often, perhaps, the client has an opinion about whether a problem has been solved or not, but even if he or she is happy with the outcome it is not certain that a group of experts evaluating the job would agree with him or her upon the quality of this, nor that there would be consensus within the expert group. Comparisons of the decisions of expert and novice auditors indicate no relationship between expertise and consensus and in high risk and less standard situations, the experts' consensus level was lower than that of novices (Bédard and Chi, 1992).

In much auditing work, as in many other cases of knowledge-intensive work there simply are no, or at best, very unreliable criteria for how to evaluate the work results. Mozier (1992) for example, remarks that 'judging the quality of an audit is an extremely problematic exercise' and says that consumers of the audit service 'have only a very limited insight into the quality of work undertaken by an audit firm' (p.2). Within advertising work, representatives of clients and the advertising agency very often have different evaluations of a particular proposal for an advertisement (Alvesson and Köping, 1993). In psychotherapy and other health services the placebo effect is important for any perceived improvement and this make it difficult, if not impossible to account for the significance of the professional therapeutical actions (Simons, 1989). To evaluate the quality and the possible consequences of personnel training or management development programmes is of course also very difficult. To separate out any consequences of 'expert knowledge' from the placebo effect in, for example, management consulting is not just empirically very complicated, but also theoretically misleading. The belief and expectations of the client are a necessary, indeed a crucial component for success. It must also be recognized that a 'good job' – if a such could be identified – does not necessarily lead to any recognizable outcomes. This is also the case in the technical or natural science-connected professions – a skilfully performed operation does not guarantee the survival of the patient – but much more so in social contexts, in which people may reject good advice and where most circumstances are beyond the control of the knowledge worker.

Interestingly enough, lack of demonstrated technical competence does not seem to affect the status and privileges of professionals to any extent. Priests and psychologists are two examples of prestigious professional groups who are unable to prove their contributions and even seem to perform inferiorly compared to distinctly non-professional organizations such as AA and some therapeutic communities dealing with drug and other psycho-social problems involving a strong moral dimension (Beckman, 1981). As Brante (1988, p.128) remarks, 'many occupational groups, such as physicians, enjoyed a high status and income even at the time their presence at the sickbed rather hastened the departure of the patient'. Consequently, partly by definition, partly through considering the various empirical settings in which KIFs operate, ambiguity accompanies evaluations of their work results.

It can thus be argued that significant for KIFs are the ambiguities characterizing (a) their claimed core product (knowledge): (b) what they are

doing (working with 'knowledge' compared to behaving in ways that are loosely connected to this quality), and (c) the results of their work (and its – mythical – meaning). Knowledge-intensive organizations are thus 'ambiguity-intensive', *i.e.* clarity and order are not the best words for providing accounts of the work and contributions of KIFOWs. Saying this is not contradictory to the acknowledgement that ambiguity exists – is a possible theme for interpretation – in all organizational life, and I am not saying that KIFs have a monopoly on this label. Focusing on ambiguity may, however, be particularly fruitful in the study of KIFOWs.

Institutionalized assumptions, expectations, recognitions, reputation, images, *etc.* are important to how the products of KIFOWs are perceived. I think that here we have one of the most significant and interesting aspects of KIFs that make them worthy being studied as a particular category.

THE CLAIMS OF KIFOWs

The notorously ambiguous character of (a significant part of) KIFOWs means that the demands of the agents involved in terms of providing convincing accounts, regulating impressions and images are central. A management consultant is thus quite different from a bus driver. The latter is hardly in the business of rhetoric. The former, together with most (?) of his knowledge-intensive colleagues, is.

I resist a clear-cut objectivist or realist dualism between rhetoric, ideology, symbols and other 'non-real' elements on the one hand and the real, the true, substance and other 'non-invented' stuff on the other hand, and resist also a strong rhetorical, relativist, symbolist, postmodernist or subjectivist thesis in which all distinctions between reality and appearence are viewed as fictions. I am not denying that sometimes we can sort out the real from the fabricated – the holocaust was not a fiction; it is more likely that a person will survive an operation by a surgeon than by a witch doctor. Most interesting research questions in social science do not, however, fit into such a pattern of thinking. The constructedness of reality and the reality of construction, the realness of symbols and the symbolic character of reality should be borne in mind (Peters and Rothenbuhler, 1989), especially, perhaps, when KIFs are studied.

Rhetoric then, is not just external to the core of KIFOWs, but in a way *is* its core. An aspect that differentiates KIFOWs from non-KIFOWs is thus the degree of elaboration of the language code through which one describes oneself, one's organization, regulates client-orientations as well as identity. Comparatively 'non-ambiguous' organizations (in terms of products and a great deal of operations and many employees' work content), such as MacDonald's, railway companies and nail manufacturers, and occupations, such as typists or machine operators, can be managed without very developed rhetorical skills. Organizations and jobs that score high on ambiguity – including KIFOWs – can not.

In many KIFOWs, talk and conversation is a crucial part of the work day (Svensson, 1990a; 1990b). Also, in technically oriented KIFOWs, such as in computer consultancy work, communication and interaction is significant for

the successful carrying out of projects – which, according to my interviewees, fail more often on non-technical than technical grounds. Of course, much service work includes a lot of verbal interaction, but the tasks normally do not call for or even allow mastery of more elaborated language codes. For example, the rhetoric involved in typical utterances by air stewardesses – 'good morning', 'what would you like to drink?', 'coffee or tea, sir?' and 'goodbye' – is not salient. But claims of KIFOWs about themselves, their capacity, work, organizations and results must score high in terms of rhetoric. Knowledge workers are often language workers. A division of labour in which PR departments and top management act as rhetors while the rest of the organization keeps quiet and does substantial work with physical outcomes does not fit KIFs.

A strict separation between having knowledge and marketing – core competence and persuading various audiences that KIFOWs possess it – is misleading for several reasons. Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, as something fixed and packaged, ready to be sold and distributed – even though some authors on KIFs prefer such a reified view. As a socially constructed phenomenon it is in a sense interaction, dependent on recognition – without being recognized by others that 'knowledge' is, for all practical matters, nothing. A somewhat superficial but significant aspect of this is the observation of the central importance of being seen as having the right (advanced, demanding and confirming) clients, joint partners and other organizations in the network (Wikström *et al.*, 1993). As Håkansson and Snehota (1989) suggest, the invisible assets of companies 'consisting largely of knowledge and abilities, fame and reputation, are mainly created in external relationships. Furthermore they cannot be separated from these relationships' (p.193). Knowledge is maintained, developed and communicated through such interactions and the best way of indicating that a KIF has knowledge to offer is to have prestigious customers or partners, well known for *their* knowledge. A consultancy firm refers to having the 'right' client and the client refers to the use of the 'right' consultants. Through such mutual confirmations, internal and external audiences 'know' that advanced knowledge is there. As said before, only insiders can by definition evaluate who is very knowledgable. Insiders are dependent on each others' recognition. The play within a relatively restricted field then becomes important.

COPING WITH AMBIGUITY: RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Formal (theoretical) knowledge has considerable prestige and symbolic value in Western society, indeed the entire world, and companies and professionals use this terminology for identity as well as image-enhancing purposes.

A knowledge-focusing rhetorical strategy is, however, not the only path taken by KIFs. My own two case studies of occupations and companies in this category – an advertising agency and a computer consultancy firm – indicated the significance of other discourses than those stressing knowledge.

In the advertising case some people complained about lack of knowledge, ignorance, *etc.* within the industry despite the fact that in the agency we

studied about one-third of the employees had a university degree (typical in business administration). At the same time one interviewee, the founder of the agency we studied, emphasized that knowledge is very important in work, while 'without knowledge one is just but a freely floating artist' (Alvesson and Köping, 1993). On the whole, however, advertising people do not emphasize knowledge as their contribution. Evidently, they can function with, according to themselves, relatively modest 'knowledge'. Instead, typical discourses stress the subjective orientations of the workers and the particular working climate of their organizations as the crucial dimension. In terms of talk and appearance (*e.g.* attire), advertising people indicate that they are aesthetic, sensitive, emotional and individualistic. These personality traits and subjective orientations are put forward as signs of their creativity and ability to communicate with the minds of the consumers in a better way than the personnel of the client organizations (who occasionally express the opinion that they could equally well produce the advertisements). Rhetoric stating that advertising workers are special and highly different from employees in bureaucracies is important in forming the identities of advertising people and provides the rationale for clients paying good money for their services (Alvesson, 1994; Alvesson and Köping, 1993).

In other jobs also, such as psychology and social work, people refer to their personal qualities as a key feature of work (Beckman, 1989). More broadly, it is sometimes stated that professionals in general are special, while such 'work and organization either attract or develop unique individuals' (Howard, 1991). Such discourses about the self may be seen as part of the self understanding and identity within a profession, but also as a way of promoting one's own labour power in the absence of more tangible signs of reliable knowledge or results.

In the computer consultancy case also, managers and consultants did not stress knowledge – in terms of technical skills – as very central. Individual orientation was also emphasized here. At a meeting for new employees one manager said that among his consultancy staff there were people with all kinds of background from nuclear physics to hairdressing(!). He thus communicated that formal knowledge was not crucial. Of course, people had some higher formal education and practical experience in computer work, and about two-thirds of the employees had a university degree. Still, the internal managerial philosophy rather strongly emphasized social orientations, communication ability and flexibility as characterizing the company (Alvesson, 1993a). The personalities and orientations of the employees were central, but even more than in the advertising case, the company emphasized its philosophy, corporate culture and ability to handle social relations in computer consultancy work at a corporate level. A broad set of verbal, action and material symbols supported and communicated these claims. Socialization and leadership also underscored the social, non-formal and anti-technocratic approach to the workplace and consultancy tasks. A lot of social activities took place in order to reinforce a particular social attitude and work climate, for internal and external reasons (Alvesson, 1993a).

The company's ability to 'manage projects' was underscored by rhetoric emphasizing the company's refined ways of dealing with the difficult social

and communicative side of computer consultancy work. When describing the highly diversified set of tasks, the broadness of the skills involved and the rather messy situation which characterizes many projects, this rhetoric highlights not technical expertise or knowledge but the 'people' side of projects. Ambiguous work can be described in many ways. The version that the work involves half-complicated programming tasks and highly complicated social and organizational situations that call for some computer knowledge and considerable social and project management skills is certainly not the only one available and many other companies use rhetoric focusing on knowledge.

In both these cases, we have companies that are quite different from average service companies in terms of the importance attributed to the individual task, the high proportion of highly educated and well paid labour and the, on the whole, non-repetitive and 'advanced' nature of the work. They thus can be seen as examples of KIFs.

That knowledge is not salient in the rhetoric used by the companies in describing their work and themselves illustrates my earlier point that a lot of other aspects are significant and that it may be too rational and simplified to see KIFs as 'agents of formal knowledge'. In both cases person-bound, subjective qualities are (presented as) significant. This does not, of course, mean that knowledge is insignificant. The modest role of knowledge rhetoric in the two cases may partly be seen in terms of their market context. Other actors, not only competing companies, but also market and computer departments of the client organizations, claim to possess knowledge. Advertising agencies and computer consultants compete with the clients' personnel and must have something in particular to offer. In order to underscore distinctiveness, emphasis on skills associated with subjective orientations and specific workplace cultures – difficult for knowledge workers employed in the bureaucracies of client companies to develop or to claim to possess – may be utilized. This may contribute to the salience of a subjectivity-oriented rhetoric and the down-playing of a knowledge-focusing rhetoric for some KIFOWs.

RETHINKING KIFOWs

An emphasis on the limited significance as well as ambiguity of knowledge in knowledge-intensive work and its relationship to institutionalized myths inspires a way of thinking radically different from functionalistic understandings of the 'knowledge factor'. The role of KIFs is partly to draw upon as well as create and offer institutionalized myths/rationality-surrogates.

Feldman and March (1981) have discovered that, in organizations, strong symbolic value is put on information. People are often over-concerned with information. For example, they gather more than they can use and often talk about it. This strong emphasis on information is grounded in wishes to be (and perhaps even more, to appear) careful, rational, reliable, even intelligent. Paradoxically, this wish to appear rational accounts for a behaviour which is not so rational, *i.e.* an over-preoccupation with information (Alvesson, 1993c). Knowledge and what knowledge workers are believed to do and accomplish – from personnel selection processes to development of software

– are attributed similar virtues. The self-understanding and image of being advanced, progressive, responsive, intelligent *etc.* are improved (a) if a person/company, when possible, perceives and presents itself as being in the knowledge business and/or (b) associates itself with KIFOWs (as consultants, clients or in networks). The cultural values of (institutionalized, formal) knowledge may account for strong tendencies to make this particular quality salient in accounts and to deny the ambiguities involved. There are, as illustrated above, also other cultural values which KIFOWs may draw upon, such as creativity, originality and interactive capacities. In these cases, the knowledge base is only partly used and other virtues, fulfilling functions similar to knowledge, are brought forward.

The view proposed here inspires a broader and more sceptical understanding of what KIFOWs do and a focus on their activities on a practical level. Without denying that knowledge may be a functional resource that is directly applied in work, the adaption of the myth perspective means that other functions of knowledge and knowledge-talk become central. Knowledge plays other roles such as (a) a means for creating community and social identity through offering organizational members a shared language and promoting their self esteem; (b) a resource for persuasion in, for example, PR work and interactions with customers; (c) providing the company with a profile (an intended image targeted at the market); (d) creating legitimacy and good faith regarding actions and outcomes, and (e) obscuring uncertainty and counteracting reflection. This last point indicates that 'knowledge' and 'knowledge work' may lead to the reverse of what it claims, that is, to ignorance and uncritical attitudes. Important for critical research is to take knowledge and knowledge products as rationality surrogates seriously, and encourage critical reflection and inspection.

These five roles may be important to consider, irrespective of how one judges various kinds of knowledge work in relationship to technical problem-solving and efficiency (the relationship between rationality and rationality-surrogate).

KIFs can be seen, apart from everything else, as 'systems of persuasion'. The ambiguities involved in work and results mean that internally as well as externally great efforts must be made in order to emphasize, for employees as well as customers and other actors in networks, that experts should be relied upon. It is thus fruitful to see knowledge work as symbolic action. Knowledge as well as other specific qualities of KIFOWs must be symbolized, for example in talk, action, titles, structures and in cultural artefacts, which reinforces the claims of a particular competence. Besides addressing knowledge in the company, it is thus important for management to develop rhetorical strategies and forms of symbolism in which the distinct claims are brought forward, made clear, credible and competitive, and to develop and control other vital abilities, orientations than those strictly knowledge-related.

Given the uncertainties involved and the importance of the workers being able to make a strong case for themselves and their companies, the identity of KIFOWs is a crucial target for management action. Management is not mainly about attracting, maintaining and developing knowledge and using this resource in optimal ways, but also a matter of influencing employees on

a broader scale, including securing and developing work and organizational identities. Cultural-ideological forms of control which affect the ways people perceive their work, organizations and themselves and the values, norms and emotions which guide them then become a crucial feature in these types of organizations (Alvesson, 1993b; Hedberg, 1990; Kunda, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Do I arrive at the conclusion that knowledge-intensive firms, organizations and workers – perhaps with a few exceptions (such as universities and scientists) – are misleading concepts that should be abandoned? Yes and no. Recognizing that there are great variations between what is referred to in the literature as KIFOWs, emphasis on the 'knowledge-factor' may be unhelpful in many cases, even contributing to the function of knowledge products as institutionalized myths. There are several problems here.

If one focuses on formal, science-based, knowledge it must be recalled that (a) even such knowledge is often uncertain (Brante, 1988); (b) the relative rationality of science and knowledge is hardly mirrored in the work of KIWs (people are less rational than science, Fores *et al.*, 1991); (c) such knowledge is a relatively limited element in what KIFs do (Alvesson, 1993a; Svensson, 1990a); (d) its impact is, to a significant degree, on a symbolic-legitimatory level (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and, finally, (e) when it seems to have a demonstrable impact it is sometimes a matter of the placebo effect.

Another key aspect to consider is that a somewhat broader concept of knowledge which better reflects what KIFs (in addition to scientific organizations) are working with – not restricted to the application of pure science or other forms of systematic knowledge – becomes very ambiguous. It captures everything and nothing. Most knowledge-intensive organizations, especially service firms, are not applying knowledge in a social vacuum, but are involved in communication, interpersonal relations, project management, and convincing others (and themselves) about their expertise is vital in the work of the majority of the employees and managers. 'Having' knowledge and expertise – about theories, models, principles, facts, processes and methods – is more or less important. So are flexibility, verbal skills, persistence, empathy, being nice, persuasive, appearing creative and a lot of other skills and orientations that are badly captured by the word knowledge. Less important than having knowledge is to appear to have knowledge, or other qualities different from the mortals. Impression management is crucial. It is very difficult objectively to determine knowledge and, given the ambiguity inherent in 'knowledge' (of the non-trivial type we are talking about here, rhetoric or discourse about it is in a sense our only non-speculative area of study (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). We can thus say that it is *claims of knowledge* (or other rare skills) rather than knowledge itself that is the interesting element to study in KIFs.

Having thus redefined knowledge-intensive to 'claims to be knowledge-intensive', and argued that other claims are also important for KIFs, I don't want to abandon the idea that 'knowledge-intensive' may be a valuable

category. We need concepts that throw light on larger entities than single examples of organizations and we certainly need to address organizations that are not straightforwardly 'professional', but still circle around the work of a labour force with, on average, a high level of education. It is very difficult to find unproblematic concepts and labels. 'Companies employing mainly well-educated personnel' would perhaps be less mystifying, but it is too clumsy, lacks abstraction and over-emphasizes formal education. I have considerable sympathy for the concept 'ambiguity-intensive' as a counterpoint to knowledge-intensive. Perhaps this captures essential aspects of KIFOWs and it certainly does not have the ideological bias of the word 'knowledge', but it is no less precise than knowledge, is a bit pejorative, and does not tell us much. Thus it only partly discriminates between KIFOWs and other organizations, as ambiguity (like knowledge) can be found everywhere – as a theoretical perspective or research strategy rather than an attribute of social reality 'out there' (Alvesson, 1993c; Martin and Meyerson, 1938). Despite these problems, taking the ambiguous nature of KIFOWs seriously may be an important element in a research strategy to understand their distinctiveness.

The focus on rhetoric partly follows from this research strategy. Ambiguity calls for a well-articulated and persuasive language in order to convince outsiders – and perhaps also insiders – that the KIFOWs have something to offer worth paying (in many cases a lot of) money for and attributing authority to. All the same, the institutions of modern society as well as traditional discourses dominating research about professions provide considerable support for such claims. General culture speaks to their advantage. In a competitive situation, KIFOWs must try to utilize these in creative, credible and distinct ways.

Two major versions of the rhetoric of professionals and other KIFOWs have been discussed. The traditional one, circling around the link to science and knowledge, and a more recent one, in which claims about a particular kind of subjectivity and an accompanying ability to deal with uncertainty – through, for example, intuition, flexibility, creativity and social skills – forms the core. The second version calls for considerable effort and imagination on behalf of the KIFOWs. It can only to a limited extent draw upon broadly institutionalized sources, so local initiatives then become crucial, as in my two case studies. A crucial dimension of KIFs is thus as systems of persuasion or local sites for rhetoric.

In contemporary business life some of the key elements of bureaucracy as well as science and professionalism – rationality, order, predictability – seems to be less popular than virtues such as change, innovation and creativity. This reflects back on the rhetoric used by some KIFs. A more strict concept of knowledge then loses some ground, while a mix of knowledge-intensive and subjective-intuitive rhetoric becomes salient. Perhaps the competition caused by mass education and an inflation of the number of occupations and organizations that can claim to be 'knowledge-intensive' leads to KIFOWs engaging in the creation of new institutional myths in which the combination of knowledge and creative environments symbolizes rationality and the route to the social good.

To conclude: KIFs may be a useful category with which to operate, if one considers the claims to knowledge, rather than knowledge itself, the ambiguity and rhetoric of knowledge-intensive firms, organizations and workers.

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