Emerald Insight

Employee Relations

The changing dynamic of leading knowledge workers: The importance of skilled front-line managers
Fiona Edgar Alan Geare Paula O'Kane

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

The changing dynamic of leading knowledge workers

The importance of skilled front-line managers

Fiona Edgar, Alan Geare and Paula O'Kane

Department of Management, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate, from the perspective of knowledge workers (KWs), the factors which underpin worker performance. Although a broad array of factors is examined, the role played by the front-line manager (FLM) appears pre-eminent.

Design/methodology/approach – Using data collected in 2012 from a sample of 73 New Zealand KWs, the authors adopt a phenomenological approach to understanding how the FLM influences their performance motivations. A two-pronged research design was employed; stage 1 involved a paired statement exercise, which was immediately followed by stage 2, an in-depth interview.

Findings – The behaviour and support afforded to KWs by their FLM emerged as an important influence on their individual performance. Specifically, behaviours which convey value, trust and respect, and afford support, recognition and an appreciation for work completed seemingly empower and motivate KWs to superior performance.

Research limitations/implications – The distinctive qualities of KWs and what constitutes their effective management needs to be given consideration in research. Identifying the depth and breadth of the FLM role contributes to this understanding.

Practical implications – FLMs need contemporary development and continued support across the broad spectrum of people management activities, to enable them to build positive relational ties, which are so important to KWs.

Originality/value – This paper contributes much needed empirical data to the understanding of how FLMs contribute to KW performance.

Keywords Employee behaviour, Line managers, Organizational performance, Employees, Qualitative methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recently, both HRM academics and practitioners have recognised that worker performance is shaped by a variety of factors. This recognition is evidenced in models of worker performance which posit that both the individual's attributes and the organisation's activities play important roles in fostering optimum performance outcomes (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). Process models of HRM go one step further, emphasising that a pivotal mediating role between these two factors is the behaviour of the front-line manager (FLM) (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Paauwe *et al.*, 2013). The FLM, in their supervisory capacity, is the agent of the organisation who is charged both with the responsibility for motivating superior performance from the individual, and also for ensuring the efficacious delivery of HRM practice (Hales, 2005; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). To some extent, we can consider this a relatively new role for the FLM, as Hales (2005, p. 475) notes that during the 1990s "supervisory responsibilities for scheduling, work allocation and discipline remained the norm and broader human resource management responsibilities were the exception".

This is a heavy mantle to bear, and, interestingly, it is one where the efficacy lies largely at the discretion of the individual (Renwick and MacNeil, 2002). In capturing

this situation Paauwe *et al.* (2013, p. 10) explain that "supervisors can differ widely in their leadership and communication styles. So two supervisors conducting a performance appraisal session might vary in the effectiveness within which each communicates support, identifies development needs, and develops action plans". Surprisingly, research exploring this and other important influencers of worker performance has, to date, received scant attention within the HRM literature (Paauwe *et al.*, 2013; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Therefore, our broader research study, in an attempt to remedy this, has opted to explore performance through the eyes of the worker and by adopting a much broader lens than that which is usually employed within HRM studies. Because not all worker groups are the same, a crucial consideration in a study exploring worker performance is the nature of the sample population. We have chosen to examine knowledge workers (KWs).

Many different stories surrounding KW performance emerged from our research, but the one we consider the most interesting and significant was the influence FLM behaviour was perceived to have upon both KW performance and their workplace experiences. As our initial research agenda was predominantly about worker performance and our chosen sample was KWs, the first section of the paper explores the uniqueness of the KW role. Following this we outline our method and then present our findings, which demonstrated the importance of FLMs in the daily working lives of KWs. At this stage, and consistent with our research approach, we revisited the literature on FLMs in order to discuss our findings. We further reinforce this within our discussion where we acknowledge the need for different FLM behaviour for KWs.

There has been exceptional growth in the number of KWs over recent decades (Rasmussen and Nielsen, 2011), and this talented group is thought to provide organisations with a valuable resource for achieving competitive advantage (Benson and Brown, 2007; Drucker, 1999; Lee and Yu, 2011; Liao, 2011; Whicker and Andrews, 2004). Understanding the performance motivations of this group is important because as Davenport *et al.* (2002) point out, "If companies can enhance knowledge worker productivity in this century anywhere near as much as they did with manual labour over the course of the last one (an increase of roughly 50 times), the payoffs will be astronomical. In the shorter term, recruiting and retaining the best knowledge workers are vital to organisational success" (p. 23).

There is an emergent view which suggests that rather than treating all workers as a homogenous group, there is value in differentiating KWs from those who engage in work of a more traditional nature (Benson and Brown, 2007; Yan *et al.*, 2011). Conceptually this argument is underpinned by a view which sees the nature of the work of KWs, as well as that of their employment relationship, as having distinctive qualities (Donnelly, 2009a). For example, Koslowsky *et al.* (2012) suggests KWs are "characterised by high levels of mobility and are prone to focus on individual and self-management in their career development" (p. 824). Further, the work of KWs is complex, dynamic and uncertain (Benson and Brown, 2007), with tasks centred mainly on knowledge creation, application and dissemination, and this makes it probable these workers will have a far greater ability to exert control over both the way they carry out their tasks and their outputs, than do those who undertake more traditional modes of work (Donnelly, 2009a; Drucker, 1999; Frenkel, 2002).

Empirically, support for the distinctiveness of KWs is also building, with a small but growing body of comparative work demonstrating that, across certain workplace and individual characteristics, KWs are indeed unique and, as such, require their own identity. As individuals, for example, KWs are found to share a different value system

to that of traditional workers, with Benson and Brown (2007) specifically finding higher attitudinal commitment and lower intentions to quit within KWs. Their work also identified divergence in the antecedents for commitment for these two worker groups, with supervisor support and co-worker behaviour being important for KWs' commitment, but not for the commitment of traditional workers (Benson and Brown, 2007). At the organisational level, differences between these groups have also been identified. For example, Yan *et al.* (2011) found that, in relation to job behaviour and performance motivations, while the task performance and satisfaction of KWs is positively influenced by job enrichment, it detrimentally impacts on these outcomes for traditional workers. Other points of difference include KWs' heightened concern for employability (Tam *et al.*, 2002) and desire for intrinsic motivation (Van Staden and Du Toit, 2012). These differences likely mean KWs are cognisant of their performance and how workplace initiatives impact this.

So who are KWs? KWs have been "broadly defined" (Harney, 2006, p. 574), with many believing them to be well educated, highly qualified (Alvesson, 2000), and undertaking work which is intellectual in nature and involving the creation, acquisition, application, processing, packaging and/or distributing of knowledge (Benson and Brown, 2007; Kelloway and Barling, 2000). Using these ideas, we similarly consider KWs as "any worker whose job involves a significant amount of gathering, creating and dissemination of knowledge". Our study has a focus on the individual, and individual performance is where employees contribute to the organisation through their "work behaviour" (Arvey and Murphy, 1998, p. 142). Recent work has suggested task and citizenship behaviours are important to performance (Motowidlo *et al.*, 1997), and accordingly both are considered in our study.

Empirically (with a few notable exceptions – Benson and Brown, 2007; Davenport *et al.*, 2002; Donnelly, 2009a, b; Horwitz *et al.*, 2003; May *et al.*, 2002) research examining KWs, their attitudes, productivity and their effective management is relatively sparse. This is of concern because, if KWs do comprise a distinct worker group, then it would follow that understanding how best to manage them effectively would and should be an important goal for many managers today. Some years back Drucker (1999) made the observation that "work on the productivity of the knowledge worker has barely begun" (p. 83). To date, it would seem not a great deal appears to have changed. The literature is somewhat ambiguous when it comes to discerning the significance of FLMs to KWs, with some highlighting their importance (Benson and Brown, 2007), and others suggesting they might be superfluous. This latter observation comes from work by Davenport *et al.* (2002) who claim, that when it comes to managing KWs, most organisations tended to "hire smart people and leave them alone" (p. 26).

It is against this backdrop that we developed a research agenda to undertake exploratory research which takes an in-depth, empirical look at both the working environments and the individual characteristics of KWs. The principal aim was to identify specifically what is important in influencing their performance and the following section outlines the approach we employed to do this.

Method

To explore the influences on KW performance and behaviour, we adopted a phenomenological approach in which we sought to understand the "lived experiences" of our KWs through "scrutinising the text for meaning 'units' which describe the central aspects of the experience" (Goulding, 2002, p. 25). Lee (1992) took this further suggesting that to "grasp the meaning and significance of social phenomena it is

necessary to understand this interpretative process and discover the motives, the reasons, and the goals which lead people to act in the ways they do" (p. 89). Cognisant of both this advice and that "qualitative inquiry" can be achieved through a variety of "data collection techniques" (Anfara *et al.*, 2002, p. 30), we employed a two-pronged research design, administered consecutively, to understand how KWs experience work. Stage 1 involved a paired statement exercise and was immediately followed by stage 2, in-depth interviews. Each session lasted between one and two hours.

Participants
This research was conducted in New Zealand. A purposeful sample was sourced, with participants targeted initially via the social networks of the researchers, followed by a snowballing technique (Marshall, 1996) (see Table I for the sample demographic profile). In all, 73 semi-structured interviews were completed. This large targeted sample had the benefits of enabling a broad population of KWs to be assessed, data richness to be optimised and data saturation to be reached.

Paired statements
At the beginning of the process, participants were presented with 50 paired statements drawn from prior conceptual work regarding performance predictors (Boxall, 2013; Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Dasborough, 2006; Drucker, 1999; Pfeffer, 1998). In total, 30 related to organisational influences on behaviour and the other 20 related to individual factors. Each anchor (or statement) was defined, and the participants could choose either anchor or, if they felt the anchor statement was too extreme they could indicate they agreed with the statement albeit to a lesser extent. In this sense the participants chose from a four-point scale. For example, in relation to HRM the participants were asked to choose between "at work I see myself as a member of a team" and "at work

Item	Classification	%
Occupation	Information technology	6
	General management	27
	Professional	18
	Administration	19
	Engineer	4
	Research and development	18
	Other	8
Organisation size	Under 25	29
	26-100	27
	Over 100	44
Length of service	0-5 years	40
	6-10 years	19
	11 plus years	41
Hours of work	Full time	88
	Part time	12
Gender	Male	47
	Female	53
Age	20-34 years	18
	35-49 years	38
	50 plus years	44

Table I.
Sample
demographics

Note: $n = 73$

I see myself as an individual" or they could suggest they partially agreed with either statement. These paired statements were used for two reasons. First, and similar to the use of card sorts in career research, they were used as a means to identify and promote individual self-awareness and to encourage reflection prior to the interview (Koen *et al.*, 2012). Second, the participants' choice of pairing enabled us to understand how KWs perceive themselves and their environments from an empirical perspective. This provides fresh insights as most writings on KWs and their environments have been written from a normative point of view; that is what researchers believe the working environments of KWs should look like. We saw this approach as having a number of benefits. As well as avoiding social desirability issues, this unbiased priming from using a paired statement exercise provided a platform for participant reflection and elaboration both in relation to how these constructs might impact performance and for any interactional effects which might be perceived to exist. This allowed assessment of a large number of variables previously identified in the literature as having the potential to influence performance, as well as affording flexibility to explore new phenomena should they emerge. We counted the number of participants who responded to each end of the scale for each paired statement. The paired statements acted as a primer and, therefore, in this paper we report only those statements which were subsequently discussed within the interviews (see Table II).

In-depth interviews
Immediately following the administration of the paired statement exercise, the participants were interviewed using a semi-structured approach, consistent with a phenomenological approach (Goulding, 2002). Although semi-structured interviews, as well as the paired statement exercise, used self-report data which can result in common method bias, the nature of the research was exploratory and therefore the aim was not to create generalisations, but rather to explore phenomena associated with KWs (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Consistent with this approach we utilised Strauss and Corbin's (1990) interpretation of grounded theory in which both the interviewee (from the paired statement exercise) and the interviewer (from the design of the study) had some prior knowledge of the topic. The analysis followed a grounded theory approach to enable meaning to be abstracted (Goulding, 2002). Each interview was analysed line-by-line to first identify open codes (in this case performance, individual disposition, performance management, rewards, opportunity, work-leisure balance, disability/diversity, training and development, communication, teamwork, recruitment, job design, environment/ culture, leadership) followed by axial coding in which these were refined into specific categories which appear unique to KWs and which took the data to a higher level of abstraction delineating the core concepts. Finally, in relation to this paper, selective coding enabled a story to be told around FLMs and their influence on KWs working lives. The next sections present these findings.

Results
In this section we present the themes which emerged from our interview data and intersperse this, where appropriate, with the results from the paired statement exercise (see Table II). Each emergent theme and sub-theme is summarised in Table III, and is primarily divided into FLM behaviour and FLM support. Key quotes are utilised to reinforce our findings, and each interviewee is identified as number one to 73 (for example I:1).

Paired statement one	Agree	Partially agree	Partially agree	Agree	Paired statement two
Organisational factors					
People management throughout my organisation is built around trust, informality and minimal hierarchy	21	20	19	11	People management throughout my organisation emphasis control, and a high degree of formality and hierarchy
My immediate manager pays a lot of attention to my interests and concerns	33	21	8	6	My immediate manager pays little attention to my interests and concerns
My immediate manager is easy to approach	53	10	4	1	My immediate manager is not that approachable
I believe my immediate manager fully recognises my potential	49	12	4	4	I do not believe my immediate manager fully recognises my potential
Our roles are broadly defined, with a high degree of differentiation in the tasks that we do	26	23	12	11	Throughout my organisation our roles are narrowly defined, with relatively fixed tasks
I have a great deal of autonomy in the way I carry out my job	53	10	6	2	The way in which I carry out my job is very much dictated by the organisation
Personal initiative and growth are key values within my organisation's environment	39	24	6	2	Personal initiative and growth are not key values within my organisation's environment
Work structure along with the environment around here provides me with the necessary support to display my talents	38	24	7	1	The way my work is structured along with the environments around here hinders me from displaying my talents
At work I see myself as a member of a team	42	20	5	3	At work I see myself as an individual
I am provided with ample useful opportunities for training and development	43	10	9	1	I am provided with limited useful opportunities for training and development
Individual factors					
I am prepared to work long and hard to achieve my goals	47	21	1	2	I am only prepared to do a fair day's work for a fair day's pay
My goal is to reach the "top" in my career and it is important for me to be seen as successful	9	17	21	24	My goal is to do a good job, but it is not crucial to me to be seen as successful
I have achieved a good balance between my work life and my personal life	34	17	13	7	I usually work long hours and often take work home at night and weekends
I have time to socialise with family and friends and to spend on leisure activities	36	21	11	3	I do not have a lot of time to socialise with family and friends and to spend on leisure activities

Notes: $n = 73$. Not every question was answered by all respondents. [a]Each participant was presented with two statements to choose between and they could either agree fully or partially with their chosen statement

Table II.
Relevant results from the paired statements exercise[a]

FLM behaviour
According to Nehles *et al.* (2006), FLMs comprise managers or supervisors who have direct supervisory responsibilities for non-managerial workers and who assume operational responsibility for the delivery of HRM to these workers on a daily basis. As we analysed the data, FLMs' behaviour and its impact on the work environment, emerged as the dominant theme within our KWs' narrative. This was a vital determinant of their performance as succinctly put by one employee from a public sector institution: "I think your immediate team leader probably impacts the most" (I:41).

As stated in the introduction, Benson and Brown (2007) found that supervisor support was important to the commitment of KWs, so finding the significance of FLMs was not unexpected. The general importance of FLMs has been acknowledged for many years. They have "an unquestioned crucial role in implementing Human Resource Management" (Nehles *et al.*, 2006, p. 257) and, more recently, there has been an increase in the role of FLMs as they have had devolved an increasing amount of responsibility for HRM, or the overall management of staff (Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003). Unfortunately this is not always successful as "not all organisations provide HR training or the necessary support for line managers to successfully accomplish their HR relevant responsibilities" (Perry and Kulik, 2008, p. 264). Recent research, however, shows that the "involvement of line manager (sic) in HRM has positive implications" (Azmi and Mushtaq, 2015, p. 18).

Another participant suggested, in the opposite vein, that "Having an incompetent manager hugely impacted my performance" (I:34). This highlights the interplay between FLMs and their KWs, but does not necessarily explain how that relationship plays out. When our interviewees discussed other elements which impacted upon their performance, these tended to relate back to the behaviour of, and their interaction with, their FLM. This was particularly evident from the following respondent who suggested that her FLM was great but had too many pressures, "He's very much a people person, got great people skills, but he's just pulled every which way but loose" (I:7). As we analysed the data, we identified eight core themes where FLMs influenced, either directly or indirectly, the KW's working life. The first, and probably the most important, relates to the levels of trust and rapport.

Building trust and rapport. Our interviewees suggested that they demanded a high level of trust from both their immediate managers and also from their organisation, in order to perform effectively. But from the paired statement data we can see the reality, at the organisational level, was quite different; 41 (56 per cent) agreeing that trust and informality was present, while 30 (41 per cent) suggested that there was more of an atmosphere of control. When this is translated to the FLM level it appears to give a

Theme	Sub-theme
Front-line manager behaviour	Building trust and rapport
	Making KWs feel valued
Front-line manager support	Supporting engaging and interesting work
	Facilitating fluid job roles
	Facilitating a positive team climate
	Identifying training and development opportunities
	Enabling work-life balance
	Engaging in life cycle awareness

Table III.
Theme and
sub-themes
emerging from the
interview data

more positive picture with 54 (74 per cent) feeling that their immediate manager paid them a lot of attention. Indeed, we observed that many of our interviewees often referred to their FLMs as "coaches". The need for trust was reinforced by one interviewee from an educational institute who discussed how it was linked to their motivation:

> I think my immediate manager is really good in terms of trying to motivate me […] I'm trusted […] the degree of trust that my manager has placed in me is a key factor […] in [me] putting 100% back into my job (I:26).

Coupled with the need to have trust placed in them, and central to building that trust was creating rapport between themselves and their immediate managers. The first building block in this relationship is ensuring that their immediate manager is approachable, which 63 (83 per cent) interviewees agreed within our paired statement data. Our respondents went further and indicated that without this rapport, trust was difficult to ascertain. The building of rapport appeared to come through effective communications between the two parties, in this case in relation to decision making: "The role of the [leader] is to articulate the common policy and to organise our shared goals […] we have a very consensual way of doing things" (I:12). The importance of trust and rapport is that it underlies KW loyalty; this loyalty does not revolve around the organisation, however, but instead, and consistent with the aforementioned relational tenets, it resides with the FLM (I:38).

When this communication was not present, KWs were more likely to keep themselves to themselves and just do their job. For example one employee from a public sector organisation suggested: "The more I think I have no idea what's going on […] at a high level […] the more I tend to close back and focus on what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing" (I:27). The negative impact of poor communication could be seen to impact on a whole department as suggested by one respondent: "But when you sat back and looked over it, it was communication, that is what it was […] that just about destroyed the department, and it was so bad they're still fighting to get it back to what it was" (I:5). Coupled with building trust and rapport was the need for KWs to feel valued by their FLM.

Making KWs feel valued. Our KWs went to great lengths to discuss the need to feel valued; much of this came from their day-to-day interactions with their FLM. In fact, 61 (84 per cent) of our sample believed their immediate manager fully recognised their potential. They appreciated feedback and recognition for the work which they contributed. This was highlighted by an employee from a construction organisation: "[My manager] recognises my potential, she listens to my views and she recognises and tells me I've got to play a very important role […] and she gives me credit for it" (I:37). Having their ideas listened to, afforded KWs a sense of confidence that what they had to say was valued by the organisation, and potentially it may also act as an informal participatory mechanism providing an avenue for employee voice within their organisations. This recognition is perhaps more important for KWs whose roles can be transient, changing from day-to-day. Without recognition and feedback, it might be difficult for them to understand where they fit in the bigger picture and whether their work is meeting expectations. When FLMs behave in the opposite way, we see respondents suggesting this behaviour leads to them exiting the organisation. In this regard the same respondent reflected: "People don't leave because of money […] They leave because they don't feel valued or because they've got a bad manager" (I:53).

Our KWs went onto discuss what a negative experience with a FLM might look like. The over-arching theme here was a sense of them being over-bearing. This manifests in control orientated behaviours from FLMs such as gatekeeping, as demonstrated by an interviewee from an educational institute: "One of the things that affects my performance is where I am physically located in the hierarchy […] the manager likes to have things filtered through him […] if he doesn't like it you sort of go sideways (I:7)". As well as considering the implicit relational behaviours exhibited by FLMs towards KWs, this research also identified how KWs thought FLMs might support them to perform well within their organisation. These are more explicit and tangible aspects of the FLM role, and so we refer to them separately as FLM support.

FLM support
Our KWs discussed what they saw as the key elements surrounding the support of their performance. Many of these were discussed: in relation to the role of the FLM in facilitating a range of core HR practices; and in relation to what they perceived as their individual responsibility.

Supporting engaging and interesting work. The paired statements data suggested that our KWs are ambitious with 68 (93 per cent) reflecting that they were prepared to work long and hard to achieve their goals. Complementing this desire for ambition is the need for challenging/interesting work. KWs appear to receive this from their interactions with their FLMs. Our interview data suggest that these workers value engaging and interesting work. As one KW suggested as they discussed their view of an effective manager: "An effective manager is always looking for ways to motivate that aren't about the money […] giving them projects and keeping them engaged and giving them purpose" (I:32).

Interesting, although our KWs were ambitious, this was not necessarily combined with a need to climb the career ladder. One-third of the sample reporting high ambition levels while the other two-thirds were not overly concerned with getting to the top of the career ladder. This might be explained by their need for flexibility, and their focus on work-life balance (discussed below). Congruent with this, we also found evidence that suggests KWs are afforded a lot of flexibility in the work that they do, with 49 (67 per cent) of our respondents suggesting that they have quite a broad job scope.

Facilitating fluid job roles. Our KWs discussed the fluid nature of their jobs, the loose job descriptions which often existed and the fact that this was what they actually desired. This enabled them to much more autonomous in how they worked; with 63 (86 per cent) saying they had autonomy and 63 (86 per cent) indicating their organisation valued personal initiative and growth. This was also reflected in their opinion of their work structure with 62 (85 per cent) indicating that their work structure provided support for them to demonstrate their talents. Coupled with the aforementioned discussion surrounding the need for feeling valued and having engaging and interesting work was an appreciation for this fluidity in their job role, as succinctly put by a female employee:

[My performance is affected by] aspects of my work environment […] I'm given flexibility […] I don't get questioned about my daily hours and what this means is that I probably work more hours than I otherwise would because that's one of the ways in which I give back. I feel like I'm valued (I:9).

It takes a FLM who is not over-bearing to really facilitate this fluidity, with one male participant from a large business advisory organisation pointing out that. "it's self-management more than anything […] you don't normally have a boss telling you, you need to do this; it's normally the individual doing it because they want to do it" (I:33).

Trust also appears integral to this outcome, with some interviewees specifically connecting the trust of a manager to increased autonomy within the job role and opportunities. Coupled with these relational attributes is the need to create a positive team atmosphere.

Facilitating a positive team climate. Although KWs, in the traditional sense are often seen as working alone and independently, our sample very much reinforced their need to work within a strong team environment, facilitated by a good team leader or FLM. In fact 62 (85 per cent) of our sample saw themselves as part of a team. As one interviewee succinctly put it: "The actual people in the organisation probably help you to excel because everyone's very approachable and pleased to help" (I:4). KWs also need strong FLMs who are aware of their development needs.

Identifying training and development opportunities. Interestingly, 53 (73 per cent) of the KWs in this sample felt that they had enough training and development but when we compare this with the interview data a different story emerges which suggests that current professional development opportunities are not what they actually wanted. One respondent suggested there was a lack of the right opportunities:

> Severe lack of professional development opportunities […] I definitely think it would have impacted on performance […] I think being able to recognise people are individuals who have individual strengths could improve their overall team performance […] it feels like the organisation [is] breeding a universal soldier (I:3).

This is consistent with the popular belief that these workers value the concept of life-long learning, and that development needs to be considered in a much broader sense, through opportunities like secondments and "stepping up". Drilling deeper, we might also infer from our data that, while organisations consider developing the careers of KWs as important, the impetus for this activity may get lost through the devolution process. The advent of this situation was illustrated by one interviewee, who in referring to the performance appraisal process, opined:

> Once a year they [HR function] do a session where all managers or team leaders have to go along and the HR manager […] says […] the emphasis this year [for performance reviews] is to develop staff and if staff have aspirations then it's your responsibility as a manager to do things, to do what you can to try and help develop (I:59).

This inference is supported by others who commented that sometimes the technical competencies of individuals were not accompanied by people management competencies. While in some instances this appeared to be linked with occupational groupings (e.g. engineers), in other cases it was linked to individuals. It is unclear, however, whether such soft-skill competencies can be easily acquired with training.

Enabling work-life balance. Many KWs are highly qualified and appreciate not only good job roles but the ability to have a highly active life outside of their workplace with 51 (70 per cent) feeling they have achieved this and 57 (78 per cent) feeling they had adequate time for their personal lives. So, while they want to give the most to their

workplaces, they also want their organisations to enable them to flourish outside of work. This need for balance is reflected on by an employee in a construction company:

> When I was going for this job I had another opportunity that was paid significantly more and I decided not to take it. They never got inside my head and understood what made me tick […] At the interview one of the old partners rocked back in his chair and told me "it's hard here, we work long, long hours. We hold each other to account, it is tough at the top - I missed my daughter's first five birthdays" […] My family is important to me and I'm not prepared to live like this (I:53).

This quote is typical of those made about work-life balance, and shows the need for FLMs to consider their KWs as a "package" – these workers have preferences that may or may not be compatible with organisational policies and practices at various times and these need to be taken into account. The role of the FLM in facilitating this balance can be seen in this comment:

> I think as people become more effective they should be able to get the same work done in less time. So instead of being given more and more work because you're effective, it's about keeping that workplace balance. And the other thing that's really interesting is it depends on where you are in your career and what age you are (I:9).

Not only does work-life balance need to be considered, more and more KWs want recognition of their life stage, be this a young rugby player, a new parent or someone working towards retirement. Different life stages bring with them a nuanced set of concerns for workers, and one of our interviewees lamented that they often find career managers have lost sight of the particular issues associated with a particular stage, with the example of early career individuals and their families often experiencing financial issues cited. The benefits that might accrue from the relational ties and understandings that bind KWs with their FLMs may even extend into the health sphere, with one interviewee asserting her "recovery" from illness was helped by the behaviours of her FLM.

Engaging in life cycle awareness. This leads us onto our final point about KWs – that they want their work to work for them. At different stages in their life cycle, they require different needs from their workplace, as succinctly put by one interviewee: "At a young age I did work quite hard […] but […] you know as they say 'you're a long time dead' and your employer's not going to put something on your gravestone saying 'well done'" (I:10). This reflects a common theme amongst this sample, that work was often considered of secondary importance to sporting endeavours and/or family commitments, and the organisation needs to ensure the nature of the employment relationship is such that consideration is given to these preferences.

Interestingly, we noted from our data that, although many commented that formal performance mechanisms were documented in their organisation's HRM policy, the reality was that these were not adhered to in any strict manner. We wonder whether this package of behaviours, combined with the consequential relational ties that appear to have formed, obviates the perceived need for more formalised processes around the performance management function. KWs work hard for their FLMs because they want to, not because they are forced to. These close-knit relations and behaviours between FLMs and their subordinates might mean that performance is addressed routinely on a daily or weekly basis, through these communicative channels and, thus, the annual performance review is seen as a bureaucratic requirement that is perfunctory and unnecessary.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to identify key factors that underpin KWs' performance with a view to contributing to their effective management. Early in our paper, we ventured that KWs, because of their disposition and motivational characteristics, would be reasonably cognisant of how they are managed. Arguably, the most salient aspect of management, the literature would have us believe, is experienced HRM-related practice. It was, therefore, surprising that our study highlighted the significance of the role played by the FLM.

So what does effective FLM behaviour and support look like to KWs? These workers indicated they have a high degree of mobility, and some suggest that because KWs are so heavily influenced by market-driven forces, it is likely they will share a transactional relationship with their organisation (but not their immediate manager), with training opportunities potentially traded for worker commitment (May *et al.*, 2002). This notion fits with Davenport *et al.*'s (2002) previously cited observation that when it comes to managing KWs, most tend to "hire smart people and leave them alone" (p. 26). Our data do not suggest this is a good strategy. We found strong, convincing evidence for a link between high performance and robust relational ties between the manager and the subordinate; this relationship being largely resonant with characteristics associated with a transformational style of leadership. Indeed, an effective FLM appears somewhat analogous to a coach, with some interviewees explicitly suggesting their FLM appears as such.

Specifically, we identified that, where our interviewees perceived their FLM to convey value, trust and respect and to provide them with support, recognition and an appreciation for work completed, they felt empowered and motivated to perform to a superior level. Interestingly, however, our scenario is one which differs markedly from May *et al.*'s (2002, p. 787) findings, where formal line supervision was characterised by KWs working in large corporations as "fluid, ambiguous and […] even […] irrelevant".

We consider trust is pivotal to the effective management of KWs. Trust is "an expectation or belief that the other party will act benevolently" (Zhang *et al.*, 2008, p. 112) and for trust to be engendered FLMs would need to exhibit the behaviours of "consistency, integrity, sharing and delegation of control, communication, and a demonstration of concern" (Whitener *et al.*, 1998, p. 516). These were all characteristics identified by KWs in our study. Trust is integral in influencing the nature of the social exchange that occurs between the worker and the organisation (Whitener *et al.*, 1998; Zhang *et al.*, 2008). The nature of this social exchange is important because it is believed that where trust is engendered, then the norm of reciprocity will also likely be reinforced (Whitener *et al.*, 1998). Reciprocity, consequently, strengthens workers' commitment and where this is enhanced, performance outcomes are thought to be optimised. Further, trust and reciprocity within the context of KWs' management, likely encourage flexible and autonomous work practices (evidenced by such things as "job crafting") (Tims and Bakker, 2010) to flourish. These sorts of practices are desirable because, not only are they sought after by this worker cohort, but they have also been linked to their performance (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003). A further benefit which seemingly develops from the strong tie that bonds KWs to their FLMs is their potential to obviate or at least reduce the need for more stringent functional HRM practices. For example, many of our KWs pointed out that performance management was seen as a perfunctory process, its need reduced by the presence of regular and effective communications.

Finally, while much has been written to suggest that as a result of the growth in teamwork, the FLM role might well dwindle in importance (for a review of these arguments see Hales, 2005), we find nothing within our data to support this. Our findings suggest FLMs are seen to comprise an integral component of both the team and of team efficacy.

Conclusions

Nearly ten years ago Hales (2005) suggested that the new role for FLMs saw them afforded a responsibility "for actively monitoring and improving performance […][that is in effect] 'performance-oriented supervision'" (p. 495). Our study has helped extend on this important finding by identifying, from the perspective of the worker, some of the specific ways in which FLMs are able to achieve this. In doing so, our findings highlight some implications both for research and for practice. Our research findings strongly support the view that FLMs are seen by KWs as a significant factor in their performance. We concur with the findings of Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) that FLM training in "people management" is both warranted and necessary and senior management need to take heed of this when appointing technically competent individuals to supervisory roles. Davenport *et al.* (2002, p. 25) found that when asked "who is responsible for enabling higher levels of knowledge-worker performance", no one seemed to want to take responsibility. Our data suggest this should fall to FLMs, and again we suggest senior management give serious consideration to this if they wish to avoid compromising the efficacy of initiatives within the HRM sphere. So, rather than adopting the practice observed by Davenport *et al.* (2002) of hiring KWs and then leaving them to their own devices, based on our research, we suggest senior management ensures FLMs of KWs are well trained and are of high quality. However, we concede that, while it is likely FLMs can be taught how to support their workers through providing developmental opportunities and the like, the deeper and more emotive aspects of FLMs' behaviour, such as the building of trust and rapport may be much more difficult to impart.

Our research leads us to suggest optimal performance does not necessarily derive solely from commitment-oriented practice and self-regulation. Strong relational ties which bring with them support, recognition and pastoral care do not come from self-management – they come from effective supervision. This likely makes the contributions of FLMs a necessary cog in the wheel of worker performance. Prior work has suggested FLMs may be reluctant participants in this equation (Renwick and MacNeil, 2002) so may be it is now time for academics to give some thought to how we might make them more willing to do so.

Our research supports a view that sees KWs considered as a distinct group and for the field of HRM this means a "one size fits all" approach may not be that appropriate. Further, KWs are likely to be professional and educated, so too are their managers. This means the differences in personality and disposition between these two groups are likely to be minimal. We suggest that it is this similarity that facilitates the development of strong bonds between these two meaning the need for more overt forms of management is removed. In the literature there is considerable overlap between concepts of "leadership", "FLM behaviour" and "supervisory support". Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 3) use an umbrella term – "people management" – to cover both the FLM's behaviour (which is aimed at positively influencing worker attitudes so as to optimise performance) and the FLM's delivery and enactment of policy (which is similarly aimed at motivating, rewarding and managing the performance of workers in

order to optimise performance). Our research findings are similar, and we believe Purcell and Hutchinson's term "people management" would be usefully employed in future research studies.

Like all research, this study has limitations. The main ones are our use of a cross-sectional research design and common method variance (CMV). With regards the former, KWs' views about themselves and their work environments were collected at a particular point in time and, as such, these data may be tainted by participants' recent experiences. In relation to the latter, as noted earlier, we used data obtained by self-reporting and, as such, there is the possibility of CMV. However, we were doing exploratory research and were not correlating predictor and criterion variable data, thus, these concerns are somewhat mitigated.

References

Alvesson, M. (2000), "Social identity and the problem of loyalty in knowledge-intensive companies", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 8, pp. 1101-1120.

Anfara, V.A. Jr, Brown, K.M. and Mangione, T.L. (2002), "Qualitative analysis on stage: making the research process more public", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 31 No. 7, pp. 28-38.

Arvey, R.D. and Murphy, K.R. (1998), "Performance evaluation in work settings", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 49 No. 1, pp. 141-168.

Azmi, F.T. and Mushtaq, S. (2015), "Role of line managers in human resource management: empirical evidence from India", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 26 No. 5, pp. 616-639.

Benson, J. and Brown, M. (2007), "Knowledge workers: what keeps them committed, what turns them away", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 121-141.

Boxall, P. (2013), "Mutuality in the management of human resources: assessing the quality of alignment in employment relationships", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 3-17.

Boxall, P. and Purcell, J. (2011), *Strategy and Human Resource Management*, 3rd ed., Palgrave MacMillan, New York, NY.

Dasborough, M.T. (2006), "Cognitive asymmetry in employee emotional reactions to leadership behaviours", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 163-178.

Davenport, T.H., Thomas, R.J. and Cantrell, S. (2002), "The mysterious art and science of knowledge-worker performance", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 23-30.

Donnelly, R. (2009a), "The knowledge economy and the restructuring of employment: the case of consultants in a contemporary bureaucratic setting", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 323-341.

Donnelly, R. (2009b), "Career behavior in the knowledge economy: experiences and perceptions of career mobility among management and IT consultants in the UK and the USA", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 75 No. 3, pp. 319-328.

Drucker, P. (1999), "Knowledge worker productivity: the biggest challenge", *California Management Review*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 79-94.

Frenkel, S. (2002), "Workplace relations: past, present and future", *Australian Journal of Management*, Vol. 27 No. S1, pp. 149-159.

Goulding, C. (2002), *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide for Management, Business and Market Researchers*, Sage, London.

Hales, C. (2005), "Rooted in supervision, branching into management: continuity and change in the role of first-line manager", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 471-506.

Harney, N.D. (2006), "Precarious migrant knowledge workers: new entrepreneurial identities in Naples, Italy", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 572-587.

Horwitz, F., Teng Heng, C. and Quazi, H. (2003), "Finders, keepers? Attracting, motivating and retaining knowledge workers", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 23-44.

Kelloway, E. and Barling, J. (2000), "Knowledge work as organizational behavior", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 287-304.

Koen, J., Klehe, U.-C. and Van Vianen, A. (2012), "Training career adaptability to facilitate a successful school-to-work transition", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 81 No. 3, pp. 395-408.

Koslowsky, M., Weisberg, J., Yaniv, E. and Zaitman-Speiser, I. (2012), "Ease of movement and sector affiliation as moderators of the organizational and career commitment", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 33 No. 7, pp. 822-839.

Larsen, H. and Brewster, C. (2011), "Line management responsibility for HRM: what is happening in Europe?", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 228-244.

Lee, H.-W. and Yu, C.-F. (2011), "Effect of organizational relationship style on the level of knowledge sharing", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 32 Nos 5/6, pp. 677-686.

Lee, S.K.J. (1992), "Quantitative versus qualitative research methods – two approaches to organisation studies", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 87-94.

Liao, Y.-S. (2011), "The effect of human resource management control systems on the relationship between knowledge management strategy and firm performance", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 32 Nos 5/6, pp. 494-511.

Marshall, M. N. (1996), "Sampling for qualitative research", *Family Practice*, Vol. 13 No. 6, pp. 522-525.

May, T.Y.-M., Korczynski, M. and Frenkel, S.J. (2002), "Organizational and occupational commitment: knowledge workers in large corporations", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 6, pp. 775-801.

Motowidlo, S., Borman, W. and Schmit, M. (1997), "A theory of individual differences in task and contextual performance", *Human Performance*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 71-83.

Nehles, A.C., van Riemsdijk, M., Kok, I. and Looise, J.K. (2006), "Implementing human resource management successfully: a first-line management challenge", *Management Revue*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 256-273.

Paauwe, J., Wright, P.M. and Guest, D.E. (2013), "HRM and performance: what do we know and where should we go?", in Paauwe, J., Guest, D.E. and Wright, P.M. (Eds), *HRM & Performance. Achievements & Challenges*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Chichester, pp. 1-13.

Perry, E.L. and Kulik, C.T. (2008), "The devotion of HR to the line: implications for perceptions of people management effectiveness", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 262-273.

Pfeffer, J. (1998), "Seven practices of successful organizations", *California Management Review*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 96-124.

Podsakoff, P.M., MacKenzie, S.B., Lee, J.-W. and Podsakoff, N.P. (2003), "Common method biases in behavioral research: a critical review of the literature and recommended remedies", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 88 No. 5, pp. 879-903.

Purcell, J. and Hutchinson, S. (2007), "Front-line managers as agents in the HRM-performance causal chain: theory, analysis and evidence", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 3-20.

Rasmussen, P. and Nielsen, P. (2011), "Knowledge management in the firm: concepts and issues", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 32 Nos 5/6, pp. 479-493.

Renwick, D. (2003), "Line manager involvement in HRM: an inside view", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 262-280.

Renwick, D. and MacNeil, C.M. (2002), "Line manager involvement in careers", *Career Development International*, Vol. 7 No. 7, pp. 407-414.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Tam, Y.M., Korczynski, M. and Frenkel, S.J. (2002), "Organizational and occupational commitment: knowledge workers in large corporations", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 6, pp. 775-801.

Tims, M. and Bakker, A.B. (2010), "Job crafting: towards a new model of individual job redesign", *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 1-9.

Van Staden, R. and Du Toit, A. (2012), "Factors that influence South African knowledge worker behaviour", *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 28-51.

Whicker, L.M. and Andrews, K.M. (2004), "HRM in the knowledge economy: realising the potential", *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 156-165.

Whitener, E.M., Brodt, S.E., Korsgaard, M.A. and Werner, J.M. (1998), "Managers as initiators of trust: an exchange relationship framework for understanding managerial trustworthy behavior", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 513-530.

Wright, P.M. and Nishii, L.H (2013), "Strategic HRM and organizational behaviour: integrating multiple levels of analysis", in Paauwe, J., Guest, D.E. and Wright, P.M. (Eds), *HRM & Performance. Achievements & Challenges*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Chichester, pp. 97-110.

Yan, M., Peng, K.Z. and Francesco, A.M. (2011), "The differential effects of job design on knowledge workers and manual workers: a quasi-experimental field study in China", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp. 407-424.

Zhang, A.Y., Tsui, A.S., Song, L.J., Li, C. and Jia, L. (2008), "How do I trust thee? The employee-organization relationship, supervisory support, and middle manager trust in the organization", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 111-132.

Further reading

Burr, R. and Girardi, A. (2002), "Intellectual capital: more than the interaction of competence × commitment", *Australian Journal of Management*, Vol. 27 No. S1, pp. 77-87.

Cortada, J.W. (1998), *Rise of the Knowledge Worker*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Boston, MA.

Davenport, T. (2005), *Thinking for a Living: How to Get Better Performance and Results from Knowledge Workers*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Jimenez-Jimenez, D. and Sanz-Valle, R. (2013), "Studying the effect of HRM practices on the knowledge management process", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 28-49.

Larsen, H.L. (2003), "Line management responsibility for HRM: what is happening in Europe", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 228-244.

Liu, A. (2004), *The Laws of Cool*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Lund, S., Manyika, J. and Ramaswamy, S. (2012), "Preparing for a new era of work", available at: www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Preparing_for_a_new_era_of_knowledge_work_3034 (accessed 11 June 2014).

Renwick, D. (2002), "Line manager involvement in HRM: an inside view", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 262-280.

Tymon, W.G. and Stumpf, S.A. (2003), "Social capital in the success of knowledge workers", *Career Development International*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 12-20.

About the authors
Dr Fiona Edgar is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management, at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, where she teaches Human Resource Management and Research Methodology. Her current research interests include HRM and, in particular, how HRM impacts on employees in the workplace, as well as the relationship between HRM and organisational performance. Dr Fiona Edgar is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: fiona.edgar@otago.ac.nz

Alan Geare (PhD) is a Professor in the Department of Management, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. He was Head of the Department from 1986 to 1998 and again 2008 to 2013. He teaches, and has published widely in the fields of employment relations and HRM, with over sixty journal articles and over a dozen books.

Dr Paula O'Kane is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Paula teaches within the fields of human resource management and organisational behaviour and her research interests include social media in the workplace, organisational communication and performance management.