

Quella qui presentata è la prefazione al libro "Management" di Peter Drucker, uno dei guru assoluti delle scienze manageriali.

La propongo alla vostra attenzione perchè sintetizza a mio avviso in maniera efficace alcune importanti caratteristiche del contesto lavorativo attuale e futuro

Preface

What will future historians consider the most important event of the twentieth century: The two World Wars? The atomic bomb? The rise of Japan to be the first non-Western great economic power? The information revolution? The *demographic revolutions* that occurred in the twentieth century—revolutions that have profoundly changed the world's human landscape and that have no precedents. And I mean not only the *quantitative change*: the explosive growth of population in the twentieth century and the equally explosive extension of life spans resulting in an aging population in all developed and in most emerging countries. Equally important, indeed perhaps more important, was the *qualitative change*: the unprecedented transformation of the workforce in all developed countries, from one doing largely unskilled, manual work, to one doing knowledge work.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ninety out of every hundred people in the working population in every country were manual workers, farmers and their hired hands, domestic servants, factory workers, miners, or construction workers. And life expectancies, especially work-life expectancies, were so low that a majority of working people were disabled well before they reached what was then the threshold of old age, that is, age fifty.

But while the life expectancy of the individual and especially the individual knowledge worker has risen beyond anything anybody could have foretold at the beginning of the twentieth century, the life expectancy of the employing institution has been going down, and is likely to keep going down. Or rather, the number of years has been shrinking during which an employing institution—and especially a business enterprise—can expect to stay successful. This period was never very long. Historically, very few businesses were successful for as long as thirty years in a row. To be sure, not all businesses ceased to exist when they ceased to do well. But the ones that survived beyond thirty years usually entered into a long period of stagnation—and only rarely did they turn around again and once more become successful growth businesses.

Thus, while the life expectancies and especially the working-life expectancies of the individual and especially of the knowledge worker have been expanding very

rapidly, the life expectancy of the employing organizations has actually been going down. And—in a period of very rapid technological change, of increasing competition because of globalization, of tremendous innovation—the successful life-expectancies of employing institutions are almost certain to continue to go down.

More and more people, and especially knowledge workers, can therefore expect to outlive their employing organizations and to have to be prepared to develop new careers, new skills, new social identities, new relationships, for the second half of their lives.

And now the largest single group in the workforce in all developed countries is knowledge workers rather than manual workers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, knowledge workers in any country, even the most highly developed ones, were very scarce. I doubt that there was any country in which they exceeded 2 or 3 percent of the working population. Now, in the United States, they account for around 33 percent of the working population. By the year 2020, they will account for about the same proportion in Japan and in Western Europe. They are something we have never seen before. These knowledge workers own their means of production, for they own their knowledge. And their knowledge is portable; it is between their ears.

For untold millennia, there were no choices for the overwhelming majority of people in any country. A farmer's son became a farmer. A craftsman's son became a craftsman, and a craftsman's daughter married a craftsman; a factory worker's son or daughter went to work in a factory. Whatever mobility there was was downward mobility. In the 250 years of Tokugawa rule in Japan, for instance, very few people advanced from being commoners to being samurai—that is, privileged warriors. An enormous number of samurai, however, lost their status and became commoners, that is, moved down. The same was true all over the world. Even in the most mobile of countries, the early twentieth-century United States, upward mobility was still the exception. We have figures from the early 1900s until 1950 or 1955. They show conclusively that at least nine out of every ten executives and professionals were themselves the sons of executives and professionals. Only one out of every ten executives or professionals came from the “lower orders” (as they were then called).

The business enterprise, as it was invented around 1860 or 1870—and it was an invention that had little precedent in history—was such a radical innovation precisely because there was upward mobility within it for a few people. This was the reason why the business enterprise ruptured the old communities—the rural village, the small town, or the craft guild.

But even the business enterprise, as it was first developed, tried to become a traditional community. It is commonly believed—in Japan as well as in the West—that the large Japanese company with its lifetime employment is some-

thing that exists only in Japan and expresses specific Japanese values. Apart from the fact that this is historical nonsense—lifetime employment in Japan even for white collar, salaried employees was a twentieth-century invention and did not exist before the end of Meiji (that is, before the twentieth century)—the large business enterprise in the West was not very different. Anyone who worked as a salaried employee for a large company in Germany, Great Britain, the United States, Switzerland, and so on had, in effect, lifetime employment. And even a salaried employee above the entry level in such a company considered himself “a company man” and identified himself with the company. He—and of course in those days they were all men—was a “Siemens Man” in Germany or a “General Electric Man” in the United States. Most of the big companies all over the West, just like the Japanese companies, hired people for only the entrance positions, and they expected them to stay until they died or retired. In fact, the Germans, with their passion for codifying everything, even created a category for such people. They were called “private civil servants” (*Privatbeamte*). Socially, they ranked below civil servants. But legally, they had the same job security and, in effect, lifetime employment—with the implicit assumption that they, in turn, would be committed to their employer for their entire working life and career. The Japanese company as it was finally formulated in the 1950s or early 1960s was, in other words, simply the most highly structured and most visible expression of the large business enterprise as it had been first developed in the late nineteenth-century and then reached full maturity in the first half of the twentieth century.

The early nineteenth-century business—and even the mid-nineteenth-century business—derived success from low costs. Successfully managing a business meant being able to produce the same commodities everybody else produced but at lower cost. In the twentieth century this then changed to what we now call “strategy” or analysis for the purpose of creating competitive advantage. I may claim to have been the first one to point this out, in a 1964 book called *Managing for Results*. But by that time a shift was already underway to another basic foundation: knowledge. [I had realized that in 1959—and the first result of this realization was my book *The Effective Executive* (1966). It was in that book that the shift to the knowledge worker was foreshadowed and its implication for the business first analyzed.]

The knowledge worker, to repeat, differs from any earlier worker in two major aspects. First, the knowledge worker owns the means of production and they are portable. Second, he or she is likely to outlive any employing organization. Add to this that knowledge work is very different in character from earlier forms of work. It is effective only if highly specialized. What makes a brain surgeon effective is that he is a specialist in brain surgery. By the same token, however, he probably could not repair a damaged knee. And he certainly would be helpless if confronted with a tropical parasite in the blood.

This is true for all knowledge work. “Generalists”—and this is what the traditional business enterprise, including the Japanese companies, tried to develop—are of limited use in a knowledge economy. In fact, they are productive only *if they themselves become specialists in managing knowledge and knowledge workers*. This, however, also means that knowledge workers, no matter how much we talk about “loyalty,” will increasingly and of necessity see their knowledge area—that is, their specialization rather than the employing organization—as what identifies and characterizes them. Their community will increasingly be people who share the same highly specialized knowledge, no matter where they work or for whom.

In the United States, as late as the 1950s or 1960s, when meeting somebody at a party and asking him what he did, one would get the answer, “I work for General Electric” or “for Citibank”—or for some other employing organization. In other words, one would get exactly the same kind of answer in Germany, in Great Britain, in France, and in any other developed country. Today, in the United States, if one asks someone whom one meets at a party, “What do you do?” the answer is likely to be, “I am a metallurgist” or “I am a tax specialist” or “I am a software designer.” In other words, in the United States, at least, knowledge workers no longer identify themselves with an employer. They identify themselves with a knowledge area. The same is increasingly true in Japan, certainly among the younger people.

This is more likely to change the organization of the future, and especially the business enterprise, than technology, information, or e-commerce.

Since 1959, when I first realized that this change was about to happen, I consciously worked at thinking through the meaning of this tremendous change, and especially the meaning for individuals. For not only is it individuals who will have to convert this change into opportunity for themselves, for their careers, for their achievement, for their identification and fulfillment. It is the individual knowledge worker who, in large measure, will determine what the organization of the future will look like and which kind of organization of the future will be successful.

There is as a consequence only one satisfactory definition of management, whether we talk of a business, a government agency, or a nonprofit organization: *to make human resources productive*. It will increasingly be the only way to gain competitive advantage. Of the traditional resources of the economist—land, labor, and capital—none anymore truly confers a competitive advantage. To be sure, not to be able to use these resources as well as anyone else is a tremendous competitive *dis-advantage*. But every business has access to the same raw materials at the same price. Access to money is worldwide. And manual labor, the traditional third resource, has become a relatively unimportant factor in most enterprises. Even in traditional manufacturing industries, labor costs are no more than 12 or 13 percent of total costs, so that even a very substantial advantage in labor costs (say a 5 percent advantage) results in a negligible competitive advantage except in a very

small and shrinking number of highly labor-intensive industries (e.g., knitting woolen sweaters). The only meaningful competitive advantage is the productivity of the knowledge worker. And that is very largely in the hands of the knowledge worker rather than in the hands of management. Knowledge workers will increasingly determine the shape of the successful employing organizations.

What this implies is basically the topic of this book. These are very new *demands*. To satisfy them will increasingly be the key to success and survival for the individual and enterprise alike. To enable its readers to be among the successes—as executives in their organization, in managing themselves and others—is the primary aim of the revised edition of this book.

I suggest you read one chapter at a time—it is a long book. And then first ask, “What do these issues, these challenges, mean for our organization and for me as a knowledge worker, a professional, an executive?” Once you have thought this through, ask, “What action should our organization and I, the individual knowledge worker and/or executive, take to make the challenges of this chapter into opportunities for our organization and me?”

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