

Employees Resistance Within a Knowledge Intensive Firm

Dimitris Lamproulis

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an empirical basis for understanding the issue of resistance within knowledge intensive firms. The paper initially provides a theoretical investigation identifying the research gap within the literature. The research gap further is explored through an empirical research. Research findings derive from the analysis of 11 in-depth interviews taken from a new media consultancy in UK. Moreover, the findings distinctively support that, staff resistance is beyond previously (traditional) assumed polar distinctions. In that way, the investigation illustrates that, staff resistance combines opposing meanings of their actions. Thus, it is revealed new aspects of employees resistance within the case organization, a knowledge intensive firm (KIF).

Keywords: resistance, knowledge, innovation, critical management thinking, culture, employees relationships

Introduction

The research focuses on the issue of staff resistance within KIFs (knowledge intensive firms). These are defined by Alvesson (2000, p. 1101) as “companies where most work can be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the workforce”. In addition, the literature includes various stream of thoughts about staff resistance. A body of research argues that, the resistance constitutes a reaction to management request (Thomas and Davies, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This results staff to selectively adopt management demands ultimately expressing their subordination (Walby, 1986). Moreover, examining employees resistance from a cultural point of view, Sturdy (1997) points out that, individuals voice their resistance due to the increased uncertainty and anxiety that experience within the process of producing innovations. In addition, Willmott (1993) underlines that, the “open cultures” of KIFs encourage individuals to possess a considerable degree of autonomy for their actions. This ultimately leads them to work hard, to be committed and to comply with seniors’ demands. (Alvesson, 1995; Kunda, 1992; De Gay, 1996). All aforementioned studies, yet, analyze employees resistance based on polar distinctions between seniors/subordinates. In contrast, the current research argues that, individuals resistance expresses the dual need of breaking away of their existing barriers (mental, social) and, at the same time, retaining pre-existing forms of social relationships. This tension is pointed to be common between all organizational members. As a result, resistance of employees is a concept that can be understood beyond bipolar discriminations of senior/ subordinates, passive/proactive resistance and individual or a team driven resistance (Derrida, 1981; Derrida, 1997).

Furthermore, the extant literature uses the term resistance to underline a way that employees adopt so as to suppress their feelings towards management. For instance, it is pointed that individuals express their resistance by distancing themselves from unpleasant consequences of their actions (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli,

1989; Kunda, 1992). Also, the staff use the mechanism of “deep acting” so as to oppress their feelings. In other words, staff improvise certain attitudes and beliefs at the back “stage” of the firm until, they can “naturally” express them for the satisfaction of clients (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, Willmott (1993) underlines that, individuals of KIFs due to their increased autonomy, they undergo discourses. These enforce them to detach themselves from the painful reality that experience following ultimately the requests of management (Zizek, 1989; Willmott, 1993). Yet, the above studies are restricted to perceiving resistance as a constant curbing of employees emotions which is in accordance with management instructions. The investigation stresses a distinct view that, staff resistance incorporates a two-fold need to be creative expressing their ideas and to follow recurring (restrictive) patterns of work. Thus, the research highlights that, resistance is been shaped between polar meanings of employees behavior.

Conceptualizing resistance in KIFs

Researchers of KIFs consider resistance to be limited in the conflict between seniors and subordinates’ interest and ideology (Alvesson, 1995; Deetz, 1992). As a result, staff are perceived to passively experience their oppression complying with seniors’ demands (Robertson and Swan, 2004). In contrast, the current research argues that, employees resistance enforces them to constantly re-examine the meaning of their behavior. Thus, employees are perpetually involved in the process of creating the conditions of their work perceiving themselves as active (and not only passive) constructors of an organizational reality (Derrida, 1981).

In addition, Alvesson et al. (2001) argue that, resistance of individuals derives from an intra-organizational competition so as to pursue their own carrier development against that of their colleagues. Also, it is underlined that individuals often illustrate resistance to the extent that does not threat their relationships with seniors (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Clark, 1995). Nevertheless, the investigation’s distinct approach points out that,

employees' resistance intermingles contradictory meanings of their actions. The need of staff to break away from management demands and (simultaneously) their need to comply with seniors directions. Also, employees resistance encourages their autonomy promoting innovative ideas while they seek to secure senior support for the implementation of a project.

Additionally, the extant literature argues that, staff resistance is regulated by the way that individuals identity (who am I?) is been shaped within KIFs. Characteristically, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Meriläinen et al. (2004) argue that, professionals identity consists of their commitment to satisfaction of clients. Moreover, Alvesson et al. (2001) support that, staff of KIFs perceive themselves as members of corporate elite, thus, they seek ways of enhancing their images rather than opposing to seniors' demands (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Also, Robertson and Swan (2004) underline that, consultants internalize norms which secure the self-regulation of their behavior agreeing to management requests (Alvesson, 2000). Yet, the above-mentioned studies are limited assuming that, the construction of staff identity is mainly influenced by seniors' control and ideology. In that way, it is omitted to examining resistance as the co-influence that is exercised between seniors and subordinates within their daily working lives. This aspect is explored by the current paper arguing that, staff behavior actually incorporates passive and active forms of resistance. Moreover, it is stressed that, staff through their resistance find themselves in a tension between attempting to change their personal (and organizational) reality while repeating pre-existing meanings and forms of organizational behavior.

Furthermore, critical is the focus of literature on forms through which employees of KIFs experience resistance. Ezzamel et al. (2001) advocate that, staff experience resistance through humor, swearing and criticizing the abilities and skills of managers. Also, resistance is articulated as staff do foot-dragging, pretending ignorance and gossiping (Scott, 1985). Furthermore, Chia (2000) points out, that the resistance of employees is expressed through sabotaging the production process. Additionally, employees resistance is delineated by not taking things seriously and undermining the importance of their working effort (Zizek, 1989). Despite that, the aforementioned examinations restrict the concept of resistance as they assume that a clear adversity occurs between subordinates and seniors. The research takes a different view arguing that, all staff (seniors and subordinates) resistance is driven by both common and different concepts within their daily organizational life. In that way, staff resistance constitutes a means of bridging their differences and an approach of pursuing their distinguishable courses of actions.

To conclude, the existent literature elaborates employees resistance assuming that a clear dichotomy takes place between seniors and subordinates' interest (Giddens, 1991; Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). This results, employees resistance to be examined from a passive (one dimensional) perspective leading to compliance with management instructions (Willmott, 1993; Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005). Despite that, the current investigation argues that, individuals' resistance has a manifold operation affecting both seniors and subordinates in similar and distinct ways. More than that, staff resistance consists of both dynamic and passive meanings that direct their behavior. Thereby, the resistance leads to actions that incorporate two opposing forces: creating a new organizational reality and sustaining the existing organizational reality within KIFs (Derrida, 1981). Drawing from this perspective, the paper underlines that staff through their resistance aim to

free themselves from pre-determined social, intellectual and emotional constrains. At the same time, staff resistance integrates a degree of inability to considerably change their personal or organizational reality. These issues are examined by the current paper as it attempts to empirically answer, how do employees resist within a case organization – a knowledge intensive firm?

Methodology

The paper is based on the analysis of a case organization – a new media consultancy. The case organization has been selected due to the fact that, it is a well known organization that exists in more than 10 years in the market. It is award winning and, it is ranked between the best 20 new business consultancies in UK, also, it constantly provides innovations in the market and, it is profitable.

In addition, the collection of adequate data is based on semi-structured in depth interviews. In particular, 11 semi-structured interviews are performed within the case organization. The new media consultancy, at the time of interviews (May, 2004), was employing 55 staff. Moreover, the interviews are taken by all ranks of the organizational ladder including the founders, directors, creative directors, project managers, client partners and programmers. Furthermore, the interviews are consisted from 63 questions. The typical length of an interview is 80 minutes and, it is varied between 45 and one and half hour. Also, field-notes are kept during the one week that, I have visited the case organization. The data is recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, the analysis and synthesis of data has been done manually by the researcher.

Furthermore, the research uses the methodology of Eisenhardt (1989) so as to draw categories which refer to resistance of employees. These, in particular, are evoked though the constant comparison of theory with data. Additionally, the research methodology adopts the analysis of data as narratives (Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Rose, 1999). According to it, narratives constitute live accounts of meanings that, employees use to reflect on the organizational reality and their discursive actions. Also, the analysis of data as narratives allows to be educed the subjective views of employees elaborating their resistance within the new media consultancy. This type of research, further, examines the reasons and conditions under which employees illustrate any form of resistance accepting that, the subjectivity of the researcher is an inherent part of the analysis of data (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

Results

Resistance and knowledge creation

The research elaborates employees resistance as follows:

“We work in silos really and we, apart from occasionally, do not talk about what the point of a project is so as to do it, how that is tackled and so forth. Also, there is the fact that you cannot go up (meaning to the upper floor where most of management directors are located apart from founders and creative Directors) and ask someone who have just done the project (John (pseudonym), major accountant and creative director)”.

In the above passage, staff resistance constitutes the isolation that, they are forced to follow within the working environment. This allows staff to exercise a degree of autonomy in the manufacturing of innovations; while it discourages their cooperation.

Thus, employees resistance enhances and deters their performance within the new media consultancy.

From a different view, it is pointed the following:

“The problems come back if people do not trust or respect each other and, we know that, no one is perfect. An internal communication, even in an small environment which is open like this, it is not straight forward. People are busy, they do not have time to say things which they should say or they are not natural communicators in the sense that, they are not good at circulating information among a wider group of people (Nick (pseudonym), Director of business development)”

The Director of business development explains that, employees resistance is expressed as lack of trust, respect and appropriate communication between each other. As a result, employees resist to completion of their work by delaying a project or leading it to failure. These inefficiencies are accepted as unavoidable phenomena and yet, they have an actual and modifying effect on a project work. Furthermore, the aforesaid staff resistance leads to actively alter project teams results and to passively accept the lack of communication between each other. Thus, the resistance encompasses both active and passive attitudes of employees so as to perform their everyday tasks. In addition, staff resistance is explained as follows:

“I am very much into delivering to other people, for instance, our department, it’s a bit careless. So you might find that the IT department, if it is doing coding, it’s rubbish communicated of what it does, so I have to explain the staff about the coding, and so I have to run after people all time. I could perfectly say thanks for the brief to the client, or I can ask the client to finish the brief, and I could try to keep the project on budget. And if it goes out of budget, then I need to ask the client, if it is OK. Nevertheless, I found out that, staff have gone over budget because, they just do not get on with the work or they stuck with their projects and, I would prefer to be communicated (on time) about these issues”. (Mandy (pseudonym), client partner)

The above text elicits the resistance that, employees exemplify within the IT department. In particularly, employees go over budget, stack with a project and badly communicate information that should be shared between the members of project teams and the clients. At the same time, the client partner tolerates the aforesaid resistance so as to ensure that, a project will be completed as much as possible on time and on budget or in a way that will satisfy the clients. Thereby, the aforesaid staff resistance incorporates their effort to be efficient and inefficient, their attempt to apply accurate timing and to delay executing a project, their need to satisfy their personal and the clients' interest within the completion of project's work. Lastly, it is pointed about employees' resistance:

“What does not work is when the opposite of that occurs. When there is tension between people and rivalry, and people hold things and, they are not sharing information and, at the end of the day, the quality of work suffers” (Clare (pseudonym), Client partner).

Interpreting the above quotation, it is pointed that, staff resistance constitutes the conflicts between members of project teams, their holding of knowledge and their lack of sharing information to each other. Yet, each employee is perceived to be responsible for the outcomes of his or her work. Thus, em-

ployees resistance leads to tensions that have a dual influence in facilitating and hindering the progress of a project.

Resistance and employees' relationships

Staff resistance underlines the issue of staff relationship within the new media consultancy. In particularly, it is pointed the following:

“...you need a good relationship (with colleagues) to have general exchange of knowledge. People do not want to give you more, to share knowledge and work with you, Unless you are a good person to work with and they enjoy working with you. if you are a bad person to work with, they will hold back and give you a little of the way” (Antony (pseudonym), client partner)

The preceding passage elaborates that, employees relationships depend on the way that share knowledge to each other. In other words, staff, in their everyday interaction, tend to hold a degree of knowledge for themselves facing their colleagues antagonistically and making sure that, they know as less as possible. Also, employees exemplify resistance allowing certain staff to have considerable access to their knowledge while others are treated with an increased hostility and displeasure. Thus, the individuals illustrate both a friendly and hostile attitude toward their colleagues and the completion of their work.

Additionally, resistance has a critical cultural concept that is elaborated as follows:

“I do not believe on values, let me think, I think, they would not necessary be values, they would be sort of emotions almost. I do not know if having a good time making sure to enjoy yourself, team work, they are really fix values like passion and such sort of stuff which, we sell to our clients all the time or that's what they (clients) want.... I do not think we need that sort of thing (values) in the creative industry. We should adapt with what are the clients' needs. if we have values, we should not be going down this route because, it means that we cannot necessary be flexible following clients businesses. I think, we should be neutral to that sort of thing (values) and exist through the work that we do (David (pseudonym), Creative Director)”

The preceding text shows that, staff resist by refusing to accept that, certain values direct their actions within the workplace. This is because, the creative director underpins that, his actions are only a subject of his own control that derives from his creative passion. In addition, the creative director claims that, the staff (experts) should be able and adjust themselves to the demands of clients while convincing them to follow values which, they do not believe in. Thus, the aforesaid staff resistance incorporates their need to believe in possessing an autonomy and to follow the requests of clients. Also, the preceding resistance critically underlines that, all staff retain vague the boundaries between of what constitutes truth and false, real and unreal for themselves and clients within the manufacturing of innovations.

Furthermore, resistance of employees is explained as follows:

“As a company, as a culture there is still a little bit of competition among people. I suppose, it's kind of people maybe wanting to be recognized for their contribution, maybe claiming a little bit more credit than they should or, more commonly, not giving credit to all those people who were involved in a project. (Nick (pseudonym), Director of business development)”

The above passage articulates that, employees are involved in a competition between each other. This takes place as they resist common organizational norms by keeping knowledge for themselves, claiming more acknowledgement than they should, and not giving credit to those that they worth it. Thereby, the staff resistance addresses the satisfaction of their personal interests while they retain a degree of collaboration with each other. Additionally, it is pointed as follows:

“Are any specific expressions that exchanged among employees? I mean we are trying to orchestrate some (expressions), we have at the moment like “Express yourself”. Yet, it’s not embedded entirely in the working environment, we still go though kicking around the ways which, we try to explain ourselves” (Alex (pseudonym), founder).

The aforementioned text underlines that, staff of new media consultancy are constantly involved in the effort to reveal themselves within the working environment. This effort leads them to identify expressions that are never fully applied within the workplace. Thus, employees constantly resist to follow guidelines as ways of controlling their own actions. At the same time, they persistently observe their “real” motives so as to systematically map their working behavior and to improve the results of their effort.

Resistance in project teams

Project teams play a central role within the new media consultancy. Interestingly, it is elaborated the following:

“I mean, yes, mainly on projects where somebody did not know a piece of information that I need to know (as a project leader) at a particular time. He was forced to give an answer and gave an incomplete answer or one that did not present the company to the client. I mean, a classic example will be to having putting together a proposal which did not have a key piece of information in it. Because, nobody who was working on that proposal knew that, we had done something relevant (in past) in regard to what the client was looking to do” (Nick (pseudonym), Director of Business Development)

As above is illustrated, employees resist in the effort to ensure the success of a project. This occurs as they hide knowledge or provide incomplete answers to their colleagues. Moreover, the staff use a bad timing of bringing information together. Thus, the aforesaid resistance leads to inefficiencies in the production of projects. At the same time, it, also, enforces staff to seek for new opportunities as they are involved in constructing projects from scratch.

Additionally, it is pointed about the staff relationships within project teams:

“But, if among the project team, employees are not truthful with each other and, they lack honesty in terms of their approach, it’s much harder to flash it out (the problem) because, you have to pick it out, if it gets embedded (in the team), the mistake or the crisis gets much harder to be removed..” (Antony(pseudonym), Client partner).

The preceding text points out that, individuals resistance is expressed as lack of honesty and truth for each other within project teams. These behaviors are difficult to be disposed by a project team and, yet, individuals resistance persistently prefer to put first their personal interest against that of their col-

leagues. This disintegrates the bonding between staff and, at the same time, it increases the individuals’ reputation within the firm. As a result, the aforementioned resistance encourages both destructive (disagreements, failures) and constructive (creativity, passion for work) aspects of individuals behavior within the process of manufacturing innovations.

Furthermore, it is mentioned the following:

“Most people here are very opinionated about what they do, which it’s good. They come with ideas and perceptions about how things should be done. Achieving a common decision is the hardest thing...” (Bryan(pseudonym), Co-founder)

The above passage elaborates that, individuals resist to taking common decisions within project teams. As a result, conflicts between staff often appear influencing every part of the organizational life. At the same time, yet, the aforementioned resistance encourages project teams to consider a number of alternatives before they agree with the most suitable solution to a project’s request. Thus, the employees’ resistance creates simultaneously difficulties and solutions within the process of manufacturing innovations.

Conclusions and discussion

The current research discrete approach based on examining the issue of resistance within a knowledge intensive firm. The research findings are resulted to consider resistance of employees within three main categories. The knowledge creative process that results in innovations, the type of relationships that are developed within the new media consultancy and the way that project teams operate. Moreover, based on theory of Derrida (1997), the paper argues that, resistance is a critical concept that evolves through the essential need of staff to act between opposing meanings of their actions. Thus, the research distinctively underlines aspects of employees resistance that, they have contradictory consequences within the case organization – a new media consultancy.

Furthermore, the current paper argues that, it goes beyond bipolar distinctions that often are taken for granted within the study of resistance. For instance, the extant literature considers resistance to be generated because of an assumed distinct difference of power between seniors and subordinates (Alvesson, and Willmott, 1996; Alvesson et al., 2001; Beech, 2008). Also, studies consider that, employees resistance leads them to be either loyal or disloyal to senior management (Collinsson, 2003; Alvesson, 2000). The aforesaid distinctions, yet, are found to be vague within the case organization. In particularly, the research findings argue that, the resistance incorporates the need of staff to be autonomous and to gain the support of their seniors. Moreover, it is pointed out that, staff exemplify resistance as they hold knowledge for themselves, and at the same time, they ensure to retain a certain degree of cooperation with their colleagues. Also, staff resistance derives from their uncertainty to believe in their abilities and from their need to illustrate an image of self-assurance to clients. Conclusively, it is highlighted that, staff resistance incorporates opposing meanings which guide them to a multiplicity of behaviors within the new media consultancy.

Additionally, a stream of research (Willmott, 1993; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001; O’ Doherty and Willmott, 2001) clearly points out that, employees of KIFs passively follow forms of resistance which lead them to comply with management decisions. Moreover, recent empirical research underpins

that, staff resistance can considerably ameliorate the influence of management within a firm (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Anderson, 2008). Despite that, the research findings distinctively support that, employees resistance combines both active and passive attitudes which result to modifying effects within a project's work. For instance, it is found out that, employees accept as unavoidable phenomenon the considerable lack of trust and appropriate communication between each other, and at the same time, they actively seek to ensure the development of their personal skills, to find out new ideas and to perform distinct project outcomes for clients.

Furthermore, the extant research concludes that, employees resistance evolves from their autonomy within KIFs (Robertson et al., 2003; Beech, 2008). This allows them to adopt multiple identities (professionals, experts) adjusting themselves to different organizational circumstances that experience in order to enforce their personal interest against that of their colleagues. In the same line of thought, a body of research points out, that employees resistance reinforces their compliance to management-demands recognizing themselves with corporate elite of KIFs (Du Gay, 1996; Kunda, 1992; Roberston and Swan, 2003). The aforesaid approaches yet, take for granted that, all individuals actions are driven by a limited number of similar goods; obtaining a senior post that secures high salary and recognition among colleagues within KIFs. Thus, it is omitted the complexity of emotions, meanings and attitudes that shape employees resistance. Distinctively, the research argues, that any explanation of employees resistance incorporates multiple and contradictory meanings of their behavior. For instance, the research findings point out that, resistance of employees merges their dual need to promote their self interest and (simultaneously) to ensure the satisfaction of clients. Similarly, it is ascertained that, individuals resistance combines both their need to delay a project or to go over budget and (at the same time) to perform their best possible work.

At last but not least, previous studies perceive staff resistance to have negative (or positive) results within the construction of innovations (Kunda, 1992; Collinson 1994; Casey, 1995; Du Gay, 1996; Fleming, 2007). Yet, the research findings highlight that, staff resistance intermingles both creative and destructive ways of manufacturing products. In particularly, the research points out that, the resistance of employees motivates them to increase their personal performance affecting, also, negatively their cooperation. Furthermore, the investigation shows that, employees resistance enforces them to adopt new approaches within the manufacturing of products. This, yet, is limited by the necessity to be ensured that each project is going to be completed as close as possible to a deadline. Similarly, the study results show that, staff resistance combines a considerable lack of commitment towards their work and the necessity to comply with a project teams norms and objectives. Thus, it is argued by the research that, employees resistance leads (concurrently) to creative and to harmful behavior within the case organization.

In conclusion, the current investigation provides distinct insights to the issue of resistance within the new media consultancy. In other words, the paper empirically shows that, staff resistance can be most comprehensively understood, if it is examined beyond the bipolar distinction between seniors/subordinates. Also, the research elaborates that, employees resistance combines passive and active attitudes within their daily working behavior. Moreover, it is pointed that, the staff resistance encloses both positive and negative meanings of behavior within the case organization. Also, the research findings articulate that, staff resistance comprises their two-fold need of

supporting their self-interest and the customers' satisfaction. In other words, it is pointed by the study that, resistance is shaped between bipolar distinctions of employees actions.

Further research and implications

The preceding discussed conclusions of research contribute to the extant organizational theory. In other words, the research provides evidence supporting that, employees' resistance is shaped by merging opposite meanings of their behavior. Thereby, it is argued that, staff resistance incorporates (both) the need to satisfy their self interest and the collective benefit of a team, their need to hold knowledge and share knowledge, to be fair and unfair with their colleagues, to act with truth and falsity, to be creative and repetitive to same ideas, to trust and distrust their colleagues.

In addition, it is stressed that, research results cannot be generalized across knowledge intensive firms. This is because; the study uses an interpretive analysis of data. Also, the results of the current work are limited within the case organization. Thus, it is encouraged further exploration to be contacted about the research topic across a variety of knowledge intensive firms. Furthermore, a future investigation could examine employees resistance as it is articulated through their use of language and communication. Additionally, a future research could attempt to explain how the resistance of individuals changes their power relationships with colleagues within knowledge intensive firms.

Moreover, the research main implications address the existent organizational theory. In particularly the current investigation argues that, staff resistance leads them to not always comply with the requests of management. In other words, it is found that, individuals of the case organization due to their autonomy, they follow their own routes of actions considerably affecting the way that project work is completed. Furthermore, the current research argues that, resistance makes vague the boundaries of power between seniors and subordinates. As a result, it is shown that, project leaders and directors often ought to tolerate staff resistance so as to ensure clients satisfaction. Thereby, it is pointed out that, employees resistance results to multiple consequences which go beyond assumed bipolar distinctions between seniors and subordinates.

In addition, the research adds to extant literature empirically showing that, staff resistance incorporates both passive and active attitudes towards their work. In particularly, the research elaborates that, employees resistance leads them to passively accept their lack of communication and to actively pursue their own recognition within their firm. Furthermore, the current paper exemplifies that, individuals resistance aggregates both creative and destructive approaches within the manufacturing of innovations. For instance, it is argued that, the staff constantly seek for opportunities to produce profound work and are limited by the need to satisfy certain demands of clients.

To conclude, the paper's main contribution derives from the empirical exploration of a case organization- a knowledge intensive firm. Moreover, it resolves that, employees resistance highlights three main categories of employees behavior: the knowledge creative process that results in innovations, the relationships that are build between employees and the operation of project teams. Furthermore, the analysis of data has shown that, employees resistance is manifested between bipolar differentiations of senior or subordinates, loyal or disloyal staff, and passive or proactive type of resistance. Consequently, it is found that, staff resistance combines opposing meanings of their ac-

tions such as cooperation and hostility, efficiency and inefficiency, knowledge sharing and knowledge holding. In that way,

the current paper reinforces a distinct approach to issues of employees resistance within KIFs.

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Author

Dr. Dimitris Lamproulis, Lecturer
e-mail: Lamprou-dim@hotmail.com
TEI (Technological Educational Institution of Larisa),
Department of Project Management, Larisa, Greece P.C.41110

Dimitris Lamproulis has completed his PhD in the University of Aberdeen, UK. His thesis refers to in use values and the creation of knowledge that transforms into innovations. He has participated in numerous conferences such as EGOS and, he has published articles to DMI and Journal of knowledge Management. Also, he is a Lecturer to Technological Educational Institution in Larisa, Greece. His research focuses on the areas of knowledge creation, innovation, organizational culture.