

Managing the 21st Century Millworker

By Matthew Seely

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Working for days on end, through the nights, sleeping only a few hours a day, and working to the point of developing auditory hallucinations – this is how one might imagine the 19th century textile mill during a period in time after the industrial revolution but prior to the managerial revolution. In actuality, this is a description given by a modern mill worker, a knowledge worker, working in a content mill – a recent publishing model that churns out a high volume of mid- to low-quality articles for online publishers. According to Oliver Miller, a former writer with AOL, he encountered this work environment as he produced topical articles about television programs (Miller, 2011). In as little as 25 minutes, he claims AOL expected him to research, write, and format a simple article about a recent television show that he had never actually watched (Miller, 2011; Heffernan, 2011). In a manner that he likens to Henry Ford gradually increasing the speed of the assembly line, the turnaround time on his articles was gradually reduced (Miller, 2011). While this is a far cry from the abuses in textile mills committed prior to the implementation of the Factory Acts in the U.K. and similar legislation elsewhere in the Western world, they illustrate nonetheless an out-of-date method of management. Taylorism – a management philosophy aimed at increasing worker productivity through management systems – is insufficient to increase knowledge worker productivity in the way that it improved labourer productivity in the 20th century. It is the manager, more so than management systems, who has the power to increase knowledge worker productivity.

Now in the interest of full disclosure I should say, I have worked casually as a freelancer for Demand Media – one of the largest content mills around – during my tenure as a student. While my experience has not been as negative as the one described by Miller, it has given me insight into the role of managers in this emerging business model. To put it bluntly, it seems like managers don't really matter to the content mills. By their own account, Demand Media

produces over 4,000 articles per day for a variety of websites such as eHow, Livestrong, the Houston Chronicle, and the San Francisco Gate (Blend, 2009). That's roughly 1.5 million articles produced per year; for comparison, it took Wikipedia 6 years to reach that size (Ayers, Matthews, and Yates, 2008). At this rate, the 18th century *Encyclopédie* could be produced in just over 2 and a half weeks.¹ This massive volume is produced by approximately 7,000 freelance writers and edited by over 1,300 copy editors (Pressman, 2010; "Stats & Reports", n.d.). A mere 50 employees are responsible for overseeing these freelancers ("Stats & Reports", n.d.); that's one employee for each 166 freelancer positions. These freelancers work independently and largely without any input from staff members – effectively there is no management overseeing production, in a production-centred business. The incredible efficiency of Demand Media's production without managers seems to call into question the need of managers to oversee 21st century knowledge workers. However, the reality tells a different story.

The reality is that the content mills are facing a crisis, and management is at the core. Demand Media made its initial public offering in January of this year and rose to a high of over \$27 per share.² As I write this, Demand Media last closed at just over \$9 per share. Granted, share prices are bound to fluctuate in the year following a public offering, but there is little doubt that content mills, in general, are facing problems. The problem facing content mills is with the quality of their content – which is actually rooted, in part, in their management. Up until recently, it appeared that quality was not important. In fact, it was reasonable to suspect that low-quality content could be beneficial, as users landing on a page without the information they were seeking might be apt to click on an ad offering a potential solution. Then along came Panda and everything changed. Panda is the code name for a change that Google made to its search

¹ The *Encyclopédie* had 71,818 articles (Outram, 2006)

² All stock quotes taken from Google Finance.

algorithm earlier this year. In response to complaints about low-quality content, Google introduced the change with the intent of punishing low-quality content in its rankings. Following the change, Google traffic to sites driven by content mills declined. Traffic to Mahalo declined 78%, Associated Content's traffic dropped 61%, and Demand Media experienced a 40% drop across its sites (Bercovici, 2011).

The reason that Demand Media's content is of poor quality is due to their production system and their attempt to increase knowledge worker productivity. The Demand Media model is the assembly line of knowledge work. In a traditional publishing scenario, either the writer pitches her article to the editor or the editor assigns a story to a suitable writer. Demand Media automates this process. A computer system scours the Internet for search queries and generates potential article titles. The title then goes through a series of workers; one selects titles that can potentially be written, one edits the title for syntax, and another assigns them to the appropriate website. Each worker is paid a few pennies for each title. Next, the titles go into a queue where writers can choose from them. The writer then selects a title, researches it, writes it, and submits it to be edited by a copyeditor who will ultimately publish it, ask for a rewrite, or reject the piece if it is not publishable after a rewrite. The writer, in this system, is empty of individualism; one writer can be swapped out for another just as one production line worker can be substituted for another or as one cog might be used to replace another in a machine. The system is utterly robotic; stupid computer programs direct it and the human work is carried out by workers who are so devoid of choice, they might as well be robots.

Demand Media claims that its writers can earn comparable pay to those working at bricks and mortar publications ("Our Manifesto, n.d.) This is true. *Time Magazine* writer Dan Fletcher was able to earn as much as \$60 per hour in his experiment working for Demand Media – more than

he earns as a legitimate journalist (Fletcher, 2010). But, as *Vanity Fair's* Matt Pressman points out, with a starting rate of \$15 for a 500-word article – or 3 cents per word – they are paying “about one-tenth of what a writer would get from a frugal magazine or newspaper” (Pressman, 2010). Demand Media’s worker productivity must, therefore, be a whopping 10 times greater than those of traditional publishers! This is not the case of course. Demand Media’s writers are not some type of journalistic Ubermensch and their production system, although highly segmented and automated, is not where the productivity gains have been achieved. They have increased productivity simply by paying writers meagre sums, and encouraging them to earn wages comparable to traditional writers earning significantly more per word. The result, of course, is that the speed increases and the quality of the output suffers. As Fletcher points out, the only way he was able to achieve these wages was by “producing articles that were thinly sourced and poorly written” (Fletcher, 2010). It’s not actually increased worker productivity, it’s increased writer output. For simple articles requiring minimal research, about how to remove stains or how to brew coffee, this is not problematic. For more complicated or specialized topics, the results are more damaging. Take for example, this statement from an eHow article about management: “The concept of management was originated by Peter Drucker who is known for fully developing the concept of management theory according to Claremont University” (Girard, 2011). This line is typical of a lot of content mill work; it’s awkwardly constructed and not entirely accurate, but not grossly incorrect or completely incoherent. It’s the result of paying a writer without knowledge of management, to write an article about it without paying him enough to research it.

Content mills know that their content needs to improve to maintain competitiveness. Freelancing for Demand Media, I’ve witnessed first-hand the response to this need for improved quality.

Twice, in recent months, Demand Media has attempted a cull of its subpar writers by putting them in a “program”. This program consists of giving the writer just three more articles to write. A senior editor edits these articles and then the writer is either kept on or let go based on her writing of these three articles. There are no discussions with the editor, no feedback about areas to work on, or any type of help to improve. Furthermore, the exact nature of what lands a writer into this purgatory is unclear but it appears to be based on some combination of one’s writing scores (as assessed by anonymous copy editors), percentage of rejected articles, and possibly the number of abandoned rewrites (rewrites that the writer allows to expire rather than submitting them). The result is that writers aren’t sure if they are performing well until they’re told that they’re not – not surprisingly many writers live in fear of being selected into this program. When they are, they still aren’t really sure what they’re doing wrong and if they are kept on, it’s not clear if they are expected to make improvements in any specific areas.

It’s clear that there is a problem with the content mill approach to increasing knowledge worker productivity. The solution, I argue, is to use managers to their full ability. But who should the managers be? According to Peter Drucker, knowledge workers need to manage themselves. Now what this means is not just that writers should manage their time, submit their articles according to the deadlines, and establish their own schedules – they should do that but those are basic work skills – management goes further. Drucker says that knowledge workers need to be partners with the businesses they work for. When Drucker says this, he’s not saying it in the way that companies flippantly refer to the employees as partners – just as they call customers members of the corporate family. Drucker is serious, believing that knowledge workers need to be treated as equals in the business relationship. This is not based on some sort of Marxist ideal, but on the reality that knowledge workers differ from labourers in one key way: they own the means of

production. At the same time, this does not make the content mills dependent entirely on the writer. The writer can benefit from the mill's means of selling and distributing the work. In short, the two sides need each other.

So what does this mean for writers in content mills? Writers need to be given responsibility for the quality of their output. Writers should be able to assess their own work and say whether it is up to snuff. This is not to say, of course, that writers should just give their articles a stamp of approval and be on their merry way; writers should be held accountable for their self-evaluations and their work should be regularly reviewed by an editor who is, in effect, a manager – a person who is identified and who has a reasonable knowledge of the writer's work. When problems are revealed, they need to be discussed between the manager-editor and the manager-writer.

Together they need to discuss the problems and how they can be overcome, as partners in the management process. It's managers who will make the content mill work, by discussing and solving problems; not management systems.

This solution is, of course, underpinned by the assumption that writers and editors are knowledgeable and qualified. They need to be experts in the area that they work in. This is not always the case as things now stand. For instance, while I can write articles for Demand Media on management and general business topics – which I consider myself relatively qualified for – I am also approved to write about automotive and plumbing topics (a frightening fact to those who know me). Not long ago, this issue came up in a discussion thread in the private Demand Media writers' forum. One writer agreed with the idea that you need to be an expert to write efficiently for content mills, but then clarified that with the use of the Internet, anyone can become an expert on anything in a matter of moments. It's this belief that will condemn content

mills to producing low-quality drivel. To produce quality articles, they need to rely on true experts.

The idea that content mills need to be filled with experts would seem to conflict with the content mill model which is based on low-cost, high-volume production. This is not necessarily true. First of all, when it comes to basic topics like “how to boil an egg”, it’s safe put the writing in the hands of a skilled writer with limited expertise. When it comes to, “how to detect cancer” (a real eHow title), the writer should have some degree of expertise. But are cancer specialists willing to work for the wages offered by content mills? The answer is probably yes. Drucker notes that retirement may well be a thing of the past. He predicts that knowledge workers will enter a semi-retired state but continue some degree of work. With baby boomers in the developed world reaching retirement age, it presents the opportunity for medical, business, legal and other professionals the opportunity to work casually, freelancing for content mills to provide some extra income. Money is not the only driver for workers – a fact often overlooked by corporations, to their own detriment – the joy of writing and seeing one’s name on a byline cannot be underestimated. The Huffington Post, which counts leading academics, politicians and various professionals among its contributors, has shown that you do not need to pay writers to get good quality writing. Of course, this only works if the publication is of sufficient quality. Many writers (myself included) write under pseudonyms, and in the case of Demand Media, writers must include a photo but are allowed to obfuscate their faces (guidelines and recommendations are provided for doing so). If experts write these publications, however, the quality will improve and writers will be eager to write for them and to show their faces. Furthermore, increased quality opens up the opportunity for better advertising. Most content mills rely on Google AdSense for their revenue, but specialized content written by experts and organized into niche sites offers the

potential for higher value advertisers and sponsors. In turn, this can allow the content mills to pay higher rates to the experts driving this increase in revenue; it's that ever-elusive business goal – a win-win partnership.

What the future holds for content mills is unclear. They will likely change and develop to meet market demands, but what is clear is that they are simply a part of continual development in the publishing world. In *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, Drucker outlines the changes that the publishing industry has experienced over the centuries. Technology has continually driven change in publishing. Monks, reproducing volumes by hand were replaced by teams of craftsmen using the printing press. Automation would, in turn, replace these craftsmen over time. Centuries later, the printed word is transitioning to the digital world. Content mills should not be seen as the end of the written word, merely as another change in line with those that have been happening for centuries. To succeed, however, they must acknowledge the changing dynamics of the employer-worker relationship. They must accept that knowledge workers hold the means of production and that together they must work as managers – that is as *people* who manage – rather than relying on 20th century scientific management techniques, to increase worker productivity.

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