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# The Work Ethic

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# The Work Ethic

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] In everyday usage of the term 'Work Ethic' is almost indistinguishable from work satisfaction or simply attitudes to work. Do people value work or not, or are they in various degrees indifferent to it? Since most adults are expected to work and most do in order to make a living, the work ethic in this popular use of the term is, on average, positive for most people. Nevertheless there are bound to be variations in this average and in the distribution around the average for different groups of people.

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## WORKING PAPER SERIES

# The Work Ethic

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Working Paper 95 - 08



## **The Work Ethic**

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## THE WORK ETHIC

*International Encyclopaedia of Business and Management - Routledge*

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*Those of us who study work are unsurprisingly convinced of its importance while ... (for) those who merely do it, it may have less cosmic significance.- Albert Cherns*

### **Some introductory thoughts**

In everyday usage of the term 'Work Ethic' is almost indistinguishable from work satisfaction or simply attitudes to work. Do people value work or not, or are they in various degrees indifferent to it? Since most adults are expected to work and most do in order to make a living, the work ethic in this popular use of the term is, on average, positive for most people. Nevertheless there are bound to be variations in this average and in the distribution around the average for different groups of people.

Social scientists tend to define the term with greater precision and want to compare and contrast the emphasis people tend to give to working with their valuation or preference for other activities in their lives, most obviously leisure, but also religion, community, the family, hobbies, and so on. In such an approach, human activities are seen to offer choices. Working may still be very central, but at the margin, people will have other preferences and the margin may be different for a variety of reasons that are interesting to explore.

Another approach is to differentiate attitudes that regard work as an obligation -something they owe society - or an entitlement - something society owes them.

Probably the most influential writing on the work ethic comes from the sociologist Max Weber (1930). In trying to explain why people pursue wealth and material gain for its own sake, not because of necessity, Weber found the answer partly in Puritan asceticism and the concept of 'calling'. Puritans sought to achieve salvation through economic activity. Weber believed the introduction of capitalism as a mass phenomenon was facilitated by factors like urbanization, the development of cooperatives and guilds, the development of a legal system, bureaucratic nation state, and the development of a moral system, which he called 'the Protestant Ethic'. The core notion of the Protestant Ethic being the idea of calling and Puritan asceticism. The notion of calling requires individuals to fulfill their duty in this world and interpret occupational success as a sign of being elected, and the notion of Puritan asceticism adds the positive evaluation of

hard, continuous, bodily or mental labour, and a negative view of idleness, luxury, and time wasting. The term Protestant ethic is still used to describe a positive attitude to hard work, possibly, unconsciously as a way of indicating an explanation of social approval. As we shall see, modern research casts doubt on the Protestant connection in the 20' century, though it appears to have had such an influence in the past.

Another related concept that has become very popular among managers and organization psychologist is work commitment or attachment to work. The assumption here, as well as with the work ethic is that people who demonstrate high values on these characteristics are somehow more effective or productive and consequently more valuable as employees and managers. Such a causal relationship is more often assumed than tested. Causality, as we shall see, is more likely to run in the other direction. People having high levels of education and skill and occupying jobs with a fair measure of autonomy are very likely to hold high work ethic values. People with lower skills, education, and control over their work tend to espouse low work ethic values (MOW, 1987, 261-3).

Research has discovered a relationship between the work ethic and social policy values like lack of sympathy for the unemployed, who are regarded as lazy and therefore responsible for their own predicament (Furnham,1987). People who hold these values believe that economic, social and other outside environmental conditions should not be considered to be causal agents or excuses for social deprivation, poverty and related misfortunes. There is clearly an association between these private beliefs and political values, but the rapid and substantial rise in unemployment in the last decades of the 20' century parallel with unprecedented changes in technology and several severe economic depressions has made these views less plausible.

Extensive tests to measure the work ethic have been developed and have shown association with achievement, motivation, ambition, and other personality factors and attitudes like economic, political, and social conservatism and self control<sup>1</sup> and self-reliance.

For all those who are not unemployed or retired, work takes up a major slice of the week; this is true even when work is unpaid, as for large numbers of women. Work is therefore closely associated with self identity and feelings of self worth. This is why involuntary retirement and unemployment create many individual problems, tensions and stress. Stress can also be a consequence of excessive work. Stress related illness seems to have increased in the run up to the 21st century and has received a lot of attention from social scientists. It is sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Technically known as *internal locus* of control. This is a measure which shows that a person perceives him/herself as having

attributed to inappropriate forms of leadership (Fiedler, Potter & McGuire, 1992). Work stress can also be self-induced and, among managers in some organizations, long hours and home work has become a cultural prescriptive that cannot easily be rejected. The workaholic's singular dedication tends to exclude the variety of human experience we associate with civilization; it narrows or excludes social intercourse, including family relations, and has been likened by some to a form of psychopathology.

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of combination of technological development and economic conditions, part time work has grown rapidly, particularly in Europe, and women have taken up a larger share of the labour market. These labour market developments, if sustained, will have an effect on the work ethic.

While intellectual inquiries into the work ethic are usually considered to be within the field of the behavioral social sciences, economics has recently claimed a stake. Buckley and Casson (1994) have argued that the main threat to the position of economics as an explanation of economic behavior "comes from accumulating evidence that cultural factors are key determinants of economic performance". They argue that culture can be considered to be a major component of human capital. The argument is that people in two different countries may have identical skills, but one country's workers may be more productive "because the moral content of the local culture makes them better motivated" (p.1040). The "moral content of the local culture" seems very similar to our description of the work ethic but the validity of the argument that local cultural differences or the work ethic can be considered as "key determinants of economic performance" has not been established.

A fair amount of cross-national research on the work ethic has been carried out.

### **International Perspectives**

In the past decade the Meaning of Working Study and its offsprings (MOW, 1987; Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1991) have collected evidence on how cultural, societal, and individual factors shape the work ethic. Intensive personal interviews were conducted with respondents representing all segments (occupational, educational, age-groups) of societies in Europe, the USA, and Asia. In some countries additional data were collected for societal groups of special interest like socialization agents (teachers). In other countries the study was replicated eight years later to estimate changes on the group level. Three year longitudinal studies were undertaken with youngsters entering the labor market to estimate individual change and additional evidence was collected in complementary case studies. All in all, more than 30,000 respondents from Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, China, England, France, Germany (both former Federal Republic as well as Democratic Republic), Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan,

the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, Spain, the U.S. where involved in one or the other study.

To summaries such a large amount of data we will confine ourselves to major cross-cultural similarities and differences and their sources.

Employment and working is perceived as characterized by one of the four values: a burden, a constraint, a responsibility (give and take), or as a social contribution. This is true whether we talk to a professional athlete or unskilled factory worker, in Beijing or Antwerp, a person starting the working career or entering retirement . For about 95 per cent of the respondents in any given society, one of these work values clearly dominates their understanding and thus their evaluation of work. Comparing the dominant view across countries we learn that the work as responsibility view dominates in Japan, two-thirds of the respondents endorsing it, while the same portion of the Slovak and Czech sees work as a social contribution. Seeing work as a burden or constraint became more prominent in the U.S. between 1982 and 1989. (Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, i.p.)

We have seen that work can be perceived as an obligation (something one owes society) or an entitlement (something society owes to a person). Differences between countries on these values are important considerations to help us understand contractual relations between employees and the organization (Rousseau, 1995). While there is high agreement between the Western and Asian societies in what contributes to the entitlement (e.g. responsibility to receive retraining or participation in decision making) and what belongs to the obligation side of the equation (for example to give value and quality, etc.) this black-and-white picture becomes blurred in the former communist states and Israel. In the latter, respondents have a hard time distinguishing between what are rights and what duties of work. This can be understood as a consequence of a mixture between an individualistic and more collectivistic approach in the dominant ideology. Being able to distinguish between rights and duties assumes that people tend to distinguish between themselves as 'private' person and citizen, and their role in the world of work, between employees and employers or between the partners of the contract.

Comparing the entitlement/obligation results for Belgium, Germany, the USA, and Japan (Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1993) we can summarize that the two European labor forces have the highest entitlement expectations; the Japanese follow, and the U.S. American have the lowest entitlement expectation. The reverse is true for the obligation scores. In addition these results proved to be rather stable over a period of six to nine years. Obviously, the respective labor forces start from different expectation points about what society/organization owe



individuals in terms of interesting and meaningful work, work as a right versus a duty, and about who -the organization or the workers themselves- should care for the workers future. We can assume that this result results also in a different understanding of "what is fair and what isn't" in these countries. Finally, in all countries the obligation orientation gets more dominant and the entitlement expectations weaker with age, increasing educational and occupational level.

In the seven country MOW work study the measure of work centrality was highest in Japan and lowest for Britain. The United States sample came somewhere in the middle. Israel and Slovenia had high work centrality, Germany and the Netherlands had low scores. In the same countries the research took samples of different occupational groups. The findings show that jobs requiring high skills and relative low centralized control (that is to say a higher measure of independence), had high work centrality (chemical engineers, self-employed, and teachers).

Adding other research data, it seems that people who have high work ethic values have skilled and moderately autonomous jobs, are older rather than younger, and come from countries like Japan, China, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Israel that have only recently moved away from agriculture and towards industrialization. The work ethic is lower but emphasis on hobbies, sport, recreation, and social activity is higher in countries like Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands which had their industrial revolution some two and a half centuries ago.

The Strathclyde Centre for the Study of Public Policy (1994) has carried out survey work in ten Central and Eastern European countries, and included a question on what people would do if by luck they unexpectedly came into a lot of money. One theoretical alternative was 'To try to get a better job'. The answers varied from 4 % in Slovenia to 16 % in Croatia. An alternative that attracted many was 'Start business, buy farm'. In every country the answer was 20 % or above, 57 % in Romania, 41 % in Croatia and 40 % in Bulgaria. There were also substantial variations in those who wanted to take the money and stop working: 4 % in Slovakia and Romania, but 19 % in Bulgaria and 21 % in Belarus.

To be really useful this type of data would have to be followed up with analysis of the degree of realism or fantasy these answers imply. For instance, realistic opportunity of starting a business or buying a farm- the 57 % of the Romanians who have answered that question? Are they indulging in a daydream or are they genuinely motivated to become entrepreneurs? This type of survey work needs to be followed up. In general, country differences are interesting but are difficult to explain and have little policy relevance.

### **Work Ethic and Policy**

There can be little doubt that at the moment and for the vast majority of people, work occupies an important place in life and takes up a considerable amount of the available time

between the end of education and retirement. There is now a trend in Western as well as Eastern countries for education to take up more time and for retirement to come earlier while at the same time, life expectancy is increasing. The consequence of these developments suggest that in the future over the life span from birth to death, work as traditionally conceived will become less important, or at least will take up less of the available time (Heller, 1991).

Nevertheless, the work ethic usefully underpins the economic system. The goods and services, including food production, which we need for survival as well as for higher standards of living, require human activity. That part of activity for which people receive pay are called work. In this sense the term 'work' in the phrase work ethic is slightly misleading because men and women undertake many different activities that are important for our standard of living that require considerable effort - the equivalent of hard work - and are capable of being characterized as being rational, frugal, achievement-oriented and deserving. Child rearing and housewifery are probably the best modern examples, but one can also include studying, amateur sports, and unpaid work for voluntary organizations like the Red Cross and Amnesty International.

We will stay with the term 'work ethic' but mentally include the important range of unpaid activities that sustain the social fabric of our society. The importance of the work ethic is its provision of a motivational dynamism that gets things done. It is this characteristic that Max Weber identified when he attributed the rise of modern capitalism in part to the Protestant ethic. Today, as we have seen, this ethic thrives in several parts of the world, like Japan and Israel, which espouse different religions. In the older western industrialized countries the centrality of working retains an important position but is complemented by other salient life interests, like the family and recreational activity.

What implications do these findings have for policy at organizational and national levels? Accepting that, other things being equal, a high work ethic has practical utility, what can be done to increase it in companies or countries where it is considered to be exceptionally low? It is not sensible to increase the age level in an organization because we know that older people have a higher work ethic, nor can one advance or retard industrialization by a century or so. We know from other social science research that exhortation alone is not very effective in changing attitudes or behavior, though parental and school influences can be important. It seems that findings which relate the work ethic to the nature and design of jobs offer useful policy recommendations but need to be tested further. Several studies have shown that high work ethic values are related to educational achievement, senior level jobs, and work which allows

self-expression, a measure of autonomy and self-regulation. (Penn et al, 1994; Lundberg & Peterson, 1994; and MOW, 1987).

These factors are interconnected but an underlying dimension is the nature of skill. Rose (1991), using results of a large-scale survey on social change and economic life in Britain, comes to the conclusion that the nature of a person's job and the level of skill largely determine the strength of the work ethic. From the data Rose concludes that work involvement and the work ethic can be strengthened by improving education and skill training. Similar improved work ethic effects would result from designing jobs to have higher and more varied skill content.

Here, then, are several practical and feasible policy options at the level of a country (educational improvement) and at the level of organization (work design changes) which seems capable of having a positive effect on the work ethic.

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