

# The Work Ethic, Then and Now

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## *I. Introduction*

Beliefs about the work ethic vary over time and place. There is a general inclination for older people to believe that things were better—or at least more moral and more decent—when they were young. The story is told of an archaeologist coming across a cuneiform tablet deploring the decline of values and behavior among youth. A historian of work, Adriano Tilgher (1931, p. 142), commented in 1931 that “every country resounds to the lament that the work-fever does not burn in the younger generation, the post-war generation.” The affluent generally complain that their subordinates, the less privileged, do not work hard and have lost the work ethic. A survey of members of the American Management Association found that 79 percent of them agreed that “the nation’s productivity is suffering because the traditional American work ethic has eroded.” This is an old story. In 1495, the English Parliament passed a statute on working hours, justifying their action in the preamble: “Diverse artifices and labourers ... waste much part of the day ... in the late coming unto their work, early departing therefrom, long sitting at breakfast, at their dinner and noon meal, and long time of sleep in afternoon.”

The idea that human beings should work hard because it is virtuous, or contributes to the common good, or allows them to accumulate personal possessions and wealth is a relatively recent phenomenon. Work is difficult, and the question is not why people are lazy or why they goof off but why, in absence of compulsion, they work hard. The Soviets, the East Europeans, and many Third World people know this. Gorbachev is trying to create a work ethic.

The ancient history of the human race speaks eloquently to the inherent disdain for work. According to the *Bible*, work was “a curse devised by God explicitly to punish the disobedience and ingratitude of Adam and Eve” (Rose, 1985, p. 28). Work is a “painful drudgery” that atones for the original sin. The Talmud tells us: “If man does not find his food like animals and birds but must earn it, that is due to sin” (Tilgher, 1931, p. 11). The Greeks also regarded work as a curse. Homer wrote that the “Gods hate mankind and out of spite condemned men to toil” (Tilgher, 1931, p. 3). Manual work was for slaves, and free people who did work were scorned. The Romans had the same opinion: Manual work was vulgar.

Early Christianity, accepting the *Bible*, took the same position as the ancient Hebrews. The one justification for wealth was charity (Tilgher, 1931, p. 35). Given

the disdain for work in medieval Christianity—and for interest, usury, and profit—the question is how did this change? How was it possible to get people to work hard, to accumulate capital, to accept the logic of capitalism?

Protestantism brought about a major shift in traditional attitudes. Martin Luther, like earlier heretics, emphasized that “work is a form of serving God” (Tilgher, 1931, p. 49), that all professions are needed, and that people should try to work well. But Luther had contempt for trade, commerce, and finance; those endeavors required no real work. Hence, he did not directly pave the way for a rational, profit-oriented economic system. He also continued to approve of the ideal-type static feudal class structure and opposed efforts toward social mobility.

Max Weber (1930) was the architect of a major change in Calvinism, which produced a new attitude toward labor. All must work, he counseled; it is the will of God. And all earnings must be invested *ad infinitum*. Weber linked this shift in attitudes toward work to the problem posed by predestination. The only way to find out if you are predestined to a place in Heaven is to succeed, which demonstrates that you are one of the Elect. Charity and helping others to succeed is a violation of God’s will. These beliefs were secularized, as Robert Merton noted, into a system of “socially patterned interests, motivations, and behavior” that were functionally related to the emphasis on rationality, hard work, and accumulation needed for increasing productivity and capital growth.

The main exponent of such values was the Protestant sects, not the state churches that incorporated the norms of medieval hierarchy. And the one major nation dominated by the Protestant sects, where the majority have adhered to them, is the United States. In his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber’s principal example of the spirit of capitalism was the writings of Benjamin Franklin. Weber and others pointed to the role of Calvinists in fostering economic growth elsewhere—for example, the English Puritans, the French Huguenots, the Swiss, and the Dutch Reformed—but most of those groups were minorities in their countries. For all of them, work was methodical, disciplined, rational, oriented toward profit and mobility, and morally justified.

European Jews also arrived at something resembling this orientation, perhaps because of their position as a minority. For them work became a means to expiate original sin and “work hard” became a maxim. The study of the Law was the highest endeavor, but labor was preferable to idleness and necessary for health. Jews required wealth to hold out against the Gentiles, and communities or individuals in a fortunate position were obligated to help the less fortunate. Without extensive charity, the Jews could not have survived.

The secular meshing of the Protestant and Jewish ethics may be seen in the translation of Franklin’s writings into Yiddish by 1800. According to reports, Jews in eastern Europe studied Franklin and his work, which says a lot about the congruence of values as a man from Pennsylvania reached out to the ghettos of Eastern Europe.

And the Jews, like the Calvinists, played a major role in the emergence of capitalism and the spread of economic rationality.

## II. *Contemporary Developments*

Until recently, the one non-Western country and culture that had successfully thrown off the traditional agrarian and aristocratic restrictive attitudes toward work and mobility was Japan. Following the Weberian model, scholars, such as Robert Bellah (1957) in *Tokugawa Religion*, found the reason for Japanese uniqueness in aspects of a religious tradition that contains elements comparable to the Protestant ethic. But in the last two decades, other Asian nations have become newly industrializing countries: South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong—the four young tigers. These successes have made the Mainland Chinese happy, for they demonstrate that Chinese culture is not antithetical to work and economic development, as some had feared. By looking at the special qualities of Japanese religion and culture, scholars have tried to specify functionally relevant aspects of Confucianism. They have concluded that “Confucian values—divorced from their imperial pretensions—contribute to the growth of a disciplined and practical attitude toward work.”

Events in the Communist world raise similar issues. A myriad of articles and recent statements by Gorbachev and Soviet analysts make clear that low work morale, inefficient work, absenteeism, and alcoholism have characterized Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and other Communist states. It is generally accepted that a basic reason for the lack of productivity is low reward and lack of incentive. In the Soviet Union, it has been reported that there is an agreement between the rulers and the ruled: “They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work.” A consensus has developed in the West and East, among many socialists and communists as well as capitalists, that a market system and differentiated reward are necessary conditions for efficient work and economic development.

We do not yet know whether structural economic reforms—the introduction of market mechanisms—will be enough to get the Communist economies going. China seems to be improving, which is not surprising, since there are major elements in Chinese culture that may be mobilized for economic rationality and diligence. The evidence is not yet in on Russian or other Soviet cultures. Beyond their historic traditions, the peoples of the Soviet Union have gone through 70 years of a disincentive system, of developing responses to evade the demands of their rulers. A work-avoidance culture is extremely hard to reform. There is variation in work behavior in eastern Europe. East Germans do better than Hungarians and Poles, although the former live under a much more state-managed Communist system.

To return to the United States, it has been generally assumed that the cultural conditions for economic development were optimal in nineteenth century America. As a new society without a feudal and aristocratic past, the United States did not have to overcome the disdain of the dominant strata for work, commerce, and mobility. Its political value system has been anti-statist; hence, the mercantilist (state)

restrictions on business have been weaker here than elsewhere. As the country of the Protestant sects, Weber noted, the United States had the value system needed for economic development. Marxists such as Friedrich Engels and Antonio Gramsci pointed to America as the purest example of a bourgeois culture. Such patterns imply a more positive orientation to work and achievement than elsewhere.

I have almost no doubt that the work ethic has declined in the United States since the nineteenth century, but the evidence from relatively recent times does not justify the bad-mouthing of work. The March 1989 issue of *Psychology Today* reported that the prediction made in the 1950s by several sociologists that Americans are increasingly emphasizing leisure and abandoning work is wrong. George Harris and Robert Trotter (1989, p. 33) analyzed the situation this way: "Work has become our intoxicant and Americans are working harder than ever before. In the past 15 years, the typical adult's leisure time has shrunk by 40 percent—down by 26.6 to 16.6 hours a week. And the work week, after decades of getting shorter, is suddenly 15 percent longer." They noted that "the average adult now pumps 46.8 hours per week into school, work, and computing—way above the 40.6 hours logged in 1973." People worked 53 hours per week in 1900, now they average around 39; but there has been almost no change since 1945.

In 1973, the decline argument was popularized in a widely cited HEW Task Force volume, *Work in America*, which contended that "significant numbers of Americans are dissatisfied with the quality of their working lives. Dull, repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks are causing discontent among workers at all occupational levels" (p. xv). This conclusion is just not sustained by the available evidence.

### III. *Attitudes Toward Work*

Roper surveys found in 1973 that 85 percent of workers said they were satisfied with the field of work they were in; only 14 percent were dissatisfied. The corresponding figures for 1980 and 1985 are the same; 84 to 15 and 85 to 14. The National Opinion Research Corporation (NORC) reported almost identical results in response to the question: "How satisfied are you with the work you do?" An average of 85 percent replied that they were satisfied with their work over the period 1972-1982. In 1988, 87 percent reported satisfaction with their work. NORC also posed this question: "If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?" For 1972-1982, the average who would "continue to work" was 70 percent; for the years 1983-1987, the mean rose to 74 percent; for 1988, the work response jumped to 85 percent. Yankelovich reported similar results. Almost all surveys indicate that the vast majority of working Americans—over 80 percent—say they are satisfied with their jobs, with no significant change in this figure over time. Many, of course, object to specific aspects of their jobs, complaining about boredom, the way work is organized, pay, and opportunity for advancement.

Yankelovich reported that almost 98 percent of U.S. workers say it is personally important to work hard, and 78 percent indicate an inner need to do their very best. His research also suggests that the motives driving people to work have changed; the proportion who work primarily or solely for money has declined, while younger and better educated workers emphasize the expressive side of work. To summarize Yankelovich, workers increasingly believe that work, rather than leisure, can give them an outlet for self-expression as well as material rewards. Roper indicated that when asked what is more important, work or leisure, many more Americans answer work rather than leisure. The ratio (46 to 33 percent in 1985) has not changed since the 1970s; it was 48 to 36 in 1980 and 48 to 36 in 1975.

Curiously, the results do not vary by socioeconomic status (occupational or educational level), but they do confirm other traditional assumptions: Protestants (53 percent) are more satisfied with their work than Catholics (43); conservatives (55) more than liberals (39); and older people more than younger ones (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Proportion Preferring Work over Leisure by Age Group, 1980*

Age Group	18-29	30-44	45-59	60 plus
Proportion	39	46	52	59

The report of a 1983 OECD international study of youth concluded: "Fears that the 'work ethic' is being rejected by young people do not seem well-founded." An earlier cross-national poll conducted under the auspices of Japan's Youth Bureau (1978) in 11 countries of 18 to 24-year-olds found a high satisfaction with place of work.

#### IV. *Work Behavior*

Attitudes as expressed to pollsters may not be the best indicator of underlying feelings, since people often respond in terms of norms. In the U.S., where there is an emphasis on individual choice, the question will be raised: If you do not like your work or your spouse, if you are not happy on the job or in marriage, then what are you doing there? Data on productivity, retirement, and absenteeism rates, however, should be a better indicator of sentiments toward work than verbally expressed beliefs are.

The statistics on these matters are in line with the results of opinion surveys. They indicate "a sustained period of strong productivity growth" between 1948 and 1973, when there was an annual rate of increasing labor productivity in manufacturing of 2.5 percent. Between 1973 and 1979, the growth rate fell off dramatically, to

1.5 percent annually. For the economy generally, it was only 0.6 percent per year during this period. The cause of the decline seems to have been an increase in the proportion of young and inexperienced workers. But from 1979 to 1989, the productivity growth rate has largely recovered, particularly in manufacturing, where it has "surpassed the pre-1973 rates." The average mean gain was 3.4 percent from 1984 to 1987, about the same as in Japan. Only Britain has had a higher average among developed countries. All industrial countries slowed down after 1973, but "only the United States and the United Kingdom have had productivity growth rates since 1979 that match or exceed their pre-1973 trend rates" (Neef and Thomas, 1988). Changes in the capital-labor ratio and in the composition of the labor force (more experienced and better educated workers) had positive effects in the United States in 1980 (Dean and Kunze, 1988).

Analyses of absenteeism show the same pattern. Data collected over 20 years in the 1960s and 1970s indicate little change in sick leave rates in America. They clearly do not support a thesis of weakening job commitment. The rates vary by age (the young have more short leaves and the old have more long ones than the middle-aged) and by type of work (professionals and executives have fewer leaves than white-collar employees, who, in turn, are absent less frequently than manual workers). Cross-national figures from the late 1970s indicate that absenteeism rates are lower in the U.S. than in all other industrialized countries except Japan. But the difference in absentee rates between the two nations are small. The rate for Japan is 2 percent; for the U.S., 3.5 percent; for Germany, 8 percent; for France, 8 percent; for Italy, 11 percent; for the Netherlands, 12 percent; and for Sweden, 14 percent. American research does not reveal any secular increase in absenteeism.

Retirement rates are another relevant behavioral phenomenon. They are, of course, affected by pension systems. Studies from the 1960s and the 1980s made in Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and the United States reveal steady increases in each country in the proportion of workers retiring or not employed. Among those aged 65 or older, the U.S. is second, although by a considerable margin, to Japan, with 18 percent still working in the U.S. compared to 41 percent in Japan. But more older people in America remain employed than in Britain, where 9 percent is employed; in Germany, 6.5 percent; or in France, 6 percent. Japan has by far the worst provisions for its elderly people. They are under much more economic pressure to continue work than Americans are.

There have been changes in attitudes toward work over the decades. While the Protestant ethic may have motivated major segments of the population to work hard before 1940, economic need and the scarcity of resources also played major roles. The affluence of the post-war world in industrialized North Europe and America has reduced the impact of the economic whip. And the enlargement of the middle-class occupational sector linked to educational achievement may have reduced the work morale of the unskilled, who are employed heavily in the service sector, in jobs largely held by immigrants and minorities.

In *Reworking the Work Ethic* (1985), Michael Rose concluded that generalizing about a decline in the work ethic simply does not hold up. This belief, he argued, is an outgrowth of the attitudes expressed by students and intellectuals of the 1960s who themselves disdain manual work. Like Yankelovich, Rose found a differential reconstruction of work values and increased emphasis on more interesting work, more participation, and less managerial control. As Harold Wilensky stressed: "The leisure oriented society is a myth. Despite talk of the decline of the 'work ethic' and in face of affluence for the majority, modern populations remain busy—with some groups becoming busier while others are condemned to forced leisure."

## VI. *Management*

A number of leading companies now acknowledge that there is a productivity problem, but it is more a problem of management, with its emphasis on finance and profit, than with the work ethic. Autocratic supervision and repetitive tasks are not the way to motivate a well-educated work force. Quality control has to come from the workers, not from management, to be effective. For example, Cummins Engine has become well-known for its emphasis on exhibiting concern for its workers, an approach that has seemingly paid off at all levels.

The auto industry provides an important example of a management turnaround, first at Chrysler, then at GM and Ford. Evidence of the new approach can be found at GM, which has sharply cut the ratio of executives to workers. Ford has tried to give workers a greater sense of participation in decision-making, to form "national work teams" that meet regularly on company time and take collective responsibility for jobs. Ford also has learning centers and gives workers a \$2,000 annual tuition voucher. The company now openly assumes that problems are more likely to be caused by managerial systems than by workers—a basic assumption held by many Japanese companies that have set up plants in the United States. These companies report that their American workers are as efficient as their Japanese workers are. Their managers are supposed to foster team cooperation among workers on the job, participation in decisions, and a low supervisor-to-worker ratio.

Given the nature and size of the trade deficit and the success of the Japanese and the East Asian newly industrialized countries (NICs) in penetrating our markets, you may be questioning my optimism. Remember that I am talking here about the work ethic, not American trade, investment, or savings practices. The relative production costs of Japanese goods have skyrocketed, yet they have held onto or increased their market shares. Why? In large part, it is because they are oriented toward maximizing such shares, toward taking a very long-term view of profits, and they are willing to forego profits now. As a nation, they save twice as much as the U.S. does as a proportion of the GDP; they pay lower dividends; their executives receive lower salaries relative to workers' incomes; and their government and business practices operate to keep imports low. The United States and Canada, however,

are the two economies that are most open to imports, the strongest adherents to free trade policies.

But America is not failing. If it were, the extensive investments in the United States from Japan, Britain, Canada, and others would not have occurred, and the domestic investment rate for the 1980s would not have risen above the average for the previous 40 years. Except for some Arab oil-producing states, the United States is still the richest country in the world in real (purchasing power) per capita income terms. As Charles Morris noted in the February 12, 1989, *New York Times Magazine*: "Americans earned about \$20 billion a year more on their foreign assets than foreigners did on their America assets." Much of our sense of malaise in this nation is created by accounting practices that lead us to underestimate our national assets.

This does not mean that there are no problems. The United States has a sizable underclass, an increasing proportion of children are living in poverty, its educational system has major difficulties, funds to replace a rotting infrastructure are hard to find, and addiction to hard drugs is growing. But these are consequences of our social, economic, and political systems, not of labor productivity or work morale.

Of course, there have been changes in the work ethic. Compared to the nineteenth century, or even the 1920s, America and other affluent countries have adopted a more leisure-oriented society. The proportion of the work force in manual employment and in manufacturing has declined considerably, while the scientific-technological, communications, and educational sectors have grown enormously. Immigration has once again become an important issue. But some of these trends should lead to an increase in productivity, including the import of millions of people with an extraordinary commitment to work.

While the old-time Protestant ethic may have grown weaker, it is still much stronger in the United States than in other Christian nations. The United States remains the most religious, most observant, most deeply believing country in Christendom. Opinion studies reveal that among manual workers white American Protestants still show up as significantly more work-oriented than Catholics, both in 1980 and 1985 Roper surveys (leisure versus work) and in NORC polls taken from 1984-1988 (continue or stop working if possible). If the impressionistic evidence is valid, however, Confucians appear to beat out the Protestant sectarians.

If social mobility is good for hard work, the objective data indicate that the opportunity to advance is greater than ever before in the U.S. as a result of structural occupational shifts and economic prosperity during the post-war era. Opinion surveys report that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe that they or their children can advance and that hard work and study are rewarded. These beliefs are stronger in the United States than they have ever been.

Other hard data, such as the decline in American union membership, directly parallel "soft" findings, such as the fall-off in the percentages of workers who voice approval of trade unions. The union density rate—the proportion of the employed



work force belonging to labor organizations—reached a high point of 35 percent in 1955. Since then, union membership has dropped to approximately 17 percent. Much has been written to explain this development as a response to shifts in economic, political, and employer behavior. My own comparative research on the subject suggests that the phenomenon reflects the refurbishment of the traditional American competitive and individualistic values that declined during the Great Depression and World War II.

The post-war prosperity, economic expansion, and the upgrading of the occupational structure have seemingly helped to undercut the more collectivist and social democratic values stimulated by the Depression and the war. A return to an emphasis on individualism and meritocracy should also facilitate work motivation. And if it is true that unions contribute to weakening labor productivity whenever they insist on practices that limit output, then a decline in union strength (particularly in the private sector) should enhance productivity. I am not certain that the complaint about unions holds overall, but I mention this for those who would blame unions for presumed declines.

Finally, as Samuel Huntington pointed out in the Winter 1988-1989 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the American economy has not been doing that badly, even when compared to the Japanese. In fact, according to Huntington, “the most notable [recent] decline in gross domestic product growth was that of Japan: its average annual growth rate between 1980 and 1986 was 58.7 percent of what it had been between 1965 and 1980. In contrast, the U.S. average annual growth rate in 1980-1986 was 110.7 percent of what it had been in 1965-80.” Between 1970 and 1987, the American share of the gross world product held steady at between 22 and 25 percent, as did its share of world exports generally (around 10 percent) and technology-intensive products in particular (about 25 percent).

I cannot confirm the fears or hopes of the pessimists. The evidence, as I read it, reinforces the conclusions of an English student of the subject, R. E. Pahl (1984), who concluded that “the work ethic is alive and well: people enjoy working and there is plenty to do.”

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