The work ethic—
then and now

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BELIEFS about the work ethic vary over time and place. There is, however, a general inclination for older people to believe that things were better—or at least more moral, more decent—when they were young. As Adriano Tilgher, a historian of work, wrote in 1931, “Every country resounds to the lament that the work-force 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 agreed that “the nation’s productivity is suffering because the traditional American work ethic has eroded.” But this is an old story. Harold Wilensky notes that in 1495 the English Parliament passed a statute on working hours and justified it in the following preamble: “Diverse artificers and labourers ... waste much part of the day ... in 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 people should work hard—because doing so is virtuous, because it advances the common good, or even because it lets them accumulate wealth—is a relatively recent one. Since work is difficult, the question is not why people goof off, but rather why—in the absence of compulsion—they work hard. The Soviets, East Europeans, and many Third World people know this. Gorbachev is even now trying to create a work ethic.

**Historical perspectives**

The ancient history of the human race speaks eloquently to the inherent disdain for work. The Greeks regarded work as a curse. As Tilgher observed, Homer wrote that the gods “hate mankind and out of spite condemned men to toil.” Manual work was for slaves, and both the Greeks and the Romans scorned free people who did it. The Bible, in the words of the British scholar Michael Rose, portrays work as “a curse devised by God explicitly to punish the disobedience and ingratitude of Adam and Eve,” a “painful drudgery” necessitated by the original sin. The Talmud too, Tilgher noted, teaches that “if man does not find his food like animals and birds but must earn it, that is due to sin.” The Jews drastically changed their understanding of God’s will, but did so only later.

Early Christianity shared the ancient Hebrew view of work. The one justification for amassing wealth was to dispense charity. Given medieval Christianity’s disdain for work, as well as for interest, usury, and profit, 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 attitudes. Martin Luther, like earlier heretics, emphasized that people could serve God through work; he argued that the professions were useful, that people should try to work well. But he had contempt for trade, commerce, and finance, because he did not believe that they involved real work. Hence Luther did not directly pave the way for a rational profit-oriented economic system. Furthermore, he continued to approve of the static class structure of feudalism, opposing people’s efforts to improve their stations in life.

Max Weber contended that Calvinism produced a new attitude toward labor. In the Calvinist view, it is the will of God that all must work; work is accordingly methodical, disciplined, and rational; it is morally justified even though oriented toward profit and mobility. Calvinists also concluded that earnings must be reinvested *ad infinitum*. Weber linked this revolutionary view to the
doctrine of predestination: the only way to find out if you were predestined to Heaven was to succeed on earth, thereby demonstrating that you were one of the Elect. Hence being charitable and helping others to rise violated God’s will.

These beliefs were secularized, as Robert Merton notes, into a system of “socially patterned interests, motivations and behavior” that were functionally related to emphases on rationality, hard work, and the accumulation of wealth. These values in turn led to increased productivity and capital growth. The main exponents of the new attitude were the Protestant sects, not the state churches that incorporated the norms of medieval hierarchy. And the one major country that has been dominated by the Protestant sects is America. In his classic work The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber’s principal example of the spirit of capitalism was found in the writings of Benjamin Franklin. Weber and others, of course, pointed to the role of Calvinists such as the English Puritans, the French Huguenots, and the Swiss and the Dutch Reformed in fostering economic growth elsewhere; of these groups, however, only the Dutch Reformed made up a majority in their country.

But does the United States still have the work ethic that it had when Max Weber visited in 1893? A decade and a half ago, a widely cited volume called Work in America, produced by a task force of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, popularized the argument that the work ethic has declined. The study 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.”

This conclusion is simply not sustained by the available evidence. While I have few doubts that the work ethic is less prominent now than it was in the nineteenth century, the available facts do not justify bad-mouthing it. As the March 1989 issue of Psychology Today notes, in the 1950s a number of sociologists predicted that Americans would increasingly choose to emphasize leisure and to abandon work—and were proven entirely wrong. To quote George Harris and Robert Trotter: “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%—down from 26.6 to 16.6 hours a week. And the work week, after decades of getting shorter, is suddenly 15% longer.” They
note that "the average adult now pumps 46.8 hours per week into school, work and commuting—way above the 40.6 hours logged in 1973." It is true that people worked fifty-three hours per week in 1900, whereas they now average around thirty-nine, but this number has remained fairly constant since 1945.

**Attitudes toward work**

One reason that more Americans have not substituted leisure for work may be that most of us like our jobs. In a 1973 Roper survey, 85 percent of the respondents said that they were satisfied with their field of work, whereas only 14 percent were dissatisfied. The corresponding figures for 1980 and 1985 show virtually no change. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) reports almost identical results in response to the question: "How satisfied are you with the work you do?" The same average percentage—85—answered that they were satisfied for the years 1972-1982. Indeed, the percentage was up a bit in 1988, when 87 percent gave this answer. NORC has also posed a tougher 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?" On average, 70 percent of the respondents questioned during the 1972-1982 period claimed that they would continue to work; the figure for 1983-1987 rose to 74 percent, and in 1988 it jumped to 85 percent. Daniel Yankelovich reports similar results.

Almost all surveys indicate that the vast majority of Americans—over 80 percent—are satisfied with their jobs. There has been no significant change in these figures over time. Many people, of course, do object to specific aspects of their jobs, complaining about boredom, pay, opportunity for advancement, the way that work is organized, and so forth.

Yankelovich reports that almost 90 percent of all American workers say that it is important to work hard; 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 saying that they work primarily or solely for money has declined, while the younger and better educated emphasize the expressive side of work. To summarize Yankelovich, such workers increasingly believe that work, rather than leisure, can give them what they are looking for: an outlet for self-expression as well as material rewards. Roper indicates that when asked whether work or leisure is more important, many more Americans choose work
than choose leisure: 46 percent to 33 percent in 1985. This figure has hardly changed since the seventies; it was 48 percent to 36 percent in both 1975 and 1980.

The results, curiously, do not vary by occupational level or education, but they do confirm other traditional assumptions: Protestants value work more than Catholics (53 percent to 43 percent), conservatives more than liberals (55 percent to 39 percent) and older people more than younger.

And even the young do not seem to scorn work. The report of a 1983 international study of youth sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development concludes that “[f]ears 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 eleven countries found that youths aged eighteen to twenty-four were highly satisfied with their jobs.

**Work behavior**

Responses to pollsters may not be the best indicators of underlying feelings, since people may bow to prevailing norms rather than invite embarrassing questions. In the U.S., with its great emphasis on individual choice, they might fear being asked: If you do not like your work, if you are not happy on the job, then what are you doing there? But data about productivity, retirement, and absenteeism rates should indicate sentiments toward work fairly accurately.

Such statistics confirm the opinion-survey results. In the words of one study, they indicate “a sustained period of strong productivity growth” between 1948 and 1973, with an annual 2.5-percent increase in labor productivity in manufacturing. It is true that this rate fell off drastically between 1973 and 1979, dipping down to 1.5 percent, and that for the economy generally it was only 0.6 percent during this period. Yet concern about this drop-off, which resulted in many books and articles, was misplaced. The drop-off apparently resulted from an increase in the proportion of young and inexperienced workers. But changes in the capital-labor ratio and in the composition of the labor force (with the hiring of more-experienced and better-educated workers) soon reversed the trend.

From 1979 to the present, the productivity growth rate has largely recovered—particularly in manufacturing, where it is reported to have “surpassed the pre-1973 rates.” The average mean
gain from 1984 to 1987 was 3.4 percent, about the same as in Japan; only Britain has had a higher average among developed countries.

Nor does America's drop-off in the seventies appear to have been caused by internal factors. Productivity growth in almost all industrial countries slowed down after 1973. Indeed, as one research team observes, "only the United States and the United Kingdom have had productivity growth rates since 1979 that match or exceed their pre-1973 trend rates."

Analyses of absenteeism show the same pattern as those of productivity. Data collected over twenty years in the sixties and seventies indicate very little change in sick-leave rates in America. They certainly do not support a thesis of weakening job commitment. The rates vary, of course, by age and occupation: the young have more short leaves (and the old have more long ones) than the middle-aged; professionals and executives have fewer sick leaves than white-collar employees, who in turn are absent less frequently than manual workers. Cross-national figures from the late seventies indicate that absenteeism rates are lower in the U.S. than in all other industrialized countries but Japan. What is more, the differences between Japan and America are comparatively small; the rate for Japan is 2 percent, while America's is 3.5 percent. By contrast, West Germany's rate is 8 percent, as is France's; Italy's is 11 percent, the Netherlands' is 12 percent, and Sweden's is 14 percent. American research, too, does not reveal any secular increase in absenteeism.

Retirement rates are another relevant statistic. Studies conducted from the sixties to the eighties in five countries—Britain, France, West Germany, Japan, and the U.S.—reveal that each country has seen steady increases in the proportion retiring or not employed. The U.S. is second to Japan, albeit by a considerable margin, in the percentage of people aged sixty-five or more who remain on the job: 18 percent are still working here, compared with 41 percent across the Pacific. But a higher proportion of older people in America remain employed than in Britain (9 percent), West Germany (6.5 percent), or France (6 percent). These rates are, of course, affected by pension systems. It should be noted that Japan has by far the worst provisions for its elderly, who face more severe economic constraints than Americans.

Naturally, there have been changes over the years. While the Protestant ethic may have motivated much of the population to
work hard prior to this century, economic need and the scarcity of resources also played major roles. The affluence of postwar America and northern Europe has reduced the impact of the lash of necessity. And the increase in the number of jobs that require educational achievements may have greatly reduced the work morale of the lowly and the unskilled—many of whom are immigrants and minorities.

Still, Reworking the Work Ethic, Rose’s comprehensive book, concludes that there has been no general decline in adherence to the work ethic. Rose contends that the growth in the belief in the decline stems from the attitudes (dating from the 1960s) of students and intellectuals who themselves disdain manual work. Like Yankelovich, Rose does note a differential reconstruction of work values, with increased emphases on more interesting work, more participation, and less managerial control. As Harold Wilensky stresses: “The leisure-oriented society is a myth. Despite talk of the decline of the ‘work ethic’ and in the face of affluence for the majority, modern populations remain busy—with some groups becoming busier while others are condemned to forced leisure.” Herbert Gans, recent president of the American Sociological Association, also notes that the research evidence indicates that “more people are doing work in which they have pride of craft today than ever before.”

**Economic evidence**

Given the nature and size of the trade deficit, and the success of the Japanese and the newly industrialized East Asian countries in penetrating our markets, my optimism may seem questionable. But I am talking about the work ethic, not about American trade, investment, or savings practices. It is true that the Japanese have maintained or increased their market shares, even though the relative production costs of their goods in dollars have skyrocketed. But this is because the Japanese aim to maximize market shares; they are willing to forgo profits now if doing so will help them in the long run. Their ratio of national savings to gross domestic product is twice as much as ours; they pay lower dividends, their executives receive lower salaries relative to workers’ incomes, and—not least—their government and business practices operate to keep imports low. (The United States and Canada, on the other hand, are the two major economies most open to imports, and closest to following free-trade policies.)
But America is not failing. If it were, there would not be extensive investments in this country from Japan, Britain, Canada, and others, and the domestic investment rate for the eighties would not have risen above the average of the previous forty years. The United States still has the highest real per-capita income of any country in the world, other than some Arab oil-producing states. In any case, as Charles Morris noted in the *New York Times Magazine*, “Americans earned about $20 billion a year more on their foreign assets than foreigners did on their American assets.” Much of our sense of malaise is created by accounting practices that lead us to underestimate our national assets.

This does not mean that we face no real problems. We have a sizable underclass; an increasing proportion of our children are living in poverty; our educational system has major difficulties; funds to replace our rotting infrastructure are difficult to find; and addiction to hard drugs is growing. But these are consequences of our social, economic, and political systems, not of low labor productivity or poor work morale.

There have, of course, been changes in the work ethic. As compared with the nineteenth century, or even the 1920s, America (like other affluent countries) has become more leisure-oriented. 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. But some of these trends—including the immigration of millions of people with an extraordinary commitment to work—should lead to an increase in productivity.

While the old-time Protestant ethic is weaker, it is still much stronger here than elsewhere. Of Christian industrialized countries, America remains the most religious and observant one, with the most believers in fundamentalist and evangelical doctrines.

If social mobility is good for hard work, the objective data indicate that opportunity to rise is greater than ever, as a result of occupational shifts and economic prosperity during almost all of the postwar era. The opinion surveys report that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe that either they or their children (or both) can rise, that hard work and study are rewarded. These beliefs are stronger than ever.

Finally, as Samuel Huntington has pointed out, the American economy as a whole has not been doing that badly, even when compared to the Japanese. In fact, “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 1980-86 was 110.7 percent of what it had been in 1965-80.” Between 1970 and 1987 the American share of the gross world product has held steady (between 22 and 25 percent), as has its portion of world exports generally (around 10 percent) and of technology-intensive products (about one quarter).

Thus I cannot confirm the fears (or hopes) of the pessimists. As I read it, the evidence reinforces the conclusions of the English scholar, R.E. Pahl: “The work ethic is alive and well: people enjoy working and there is plenty to do.”