



Work Ethic... The Character Trait That Moves Mountains or Clouds One's Perspective on Life

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Work ethic is a set of values based on hard work and diligence. It is also the belief in the moral benefit of work and the ability to enhance one's character.

The Four D's of Work Ethic

The characteristics of work ethic can best be communicated through the following Four D's:

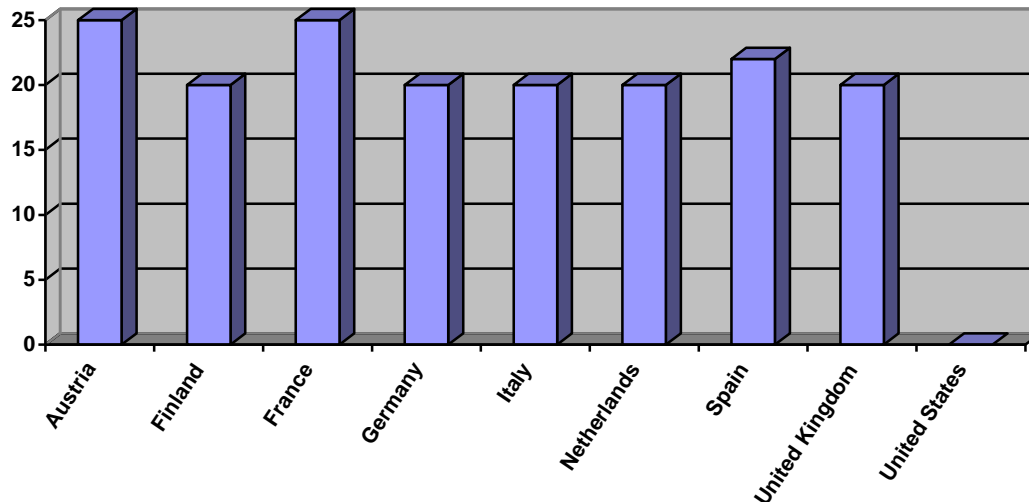
1. **Desire:** How badly do you want it? How important is it that you accomplish your missions or goals?
2. **Dedication:** Turning desire into action, which requires lasting commitment. How dedicated are you to your goals and dreams?
3. **Determination:** This represents the intensity through which you are dedicated to the accomplishment of your goals. How determined are you?

4. **Discipline:** Allows you to make the most of what you have. Discipline is action oriented. It is deciding how you will go about achieving your goals by staying with your strategy.

A number of years ago, I had a meeting with a Dutch client. He was telling me about his upcoming four-week family vacation. I said something like, "Wow, four weeks!" And he said, "Yeah, that only leaves me with three weeks of vacation for the rest of the year."

I then asked him how many years he has been working to save up that amount of vacation time. He did not understand what I meant. "Seven weeks' vacation is typical in the Netherlands," he said. "How many weeks do people in the United States get"? I told him that two weeks was standard and three weeks would be offered after 10 or so years of dedicated service. My Dutch friend was astounded.

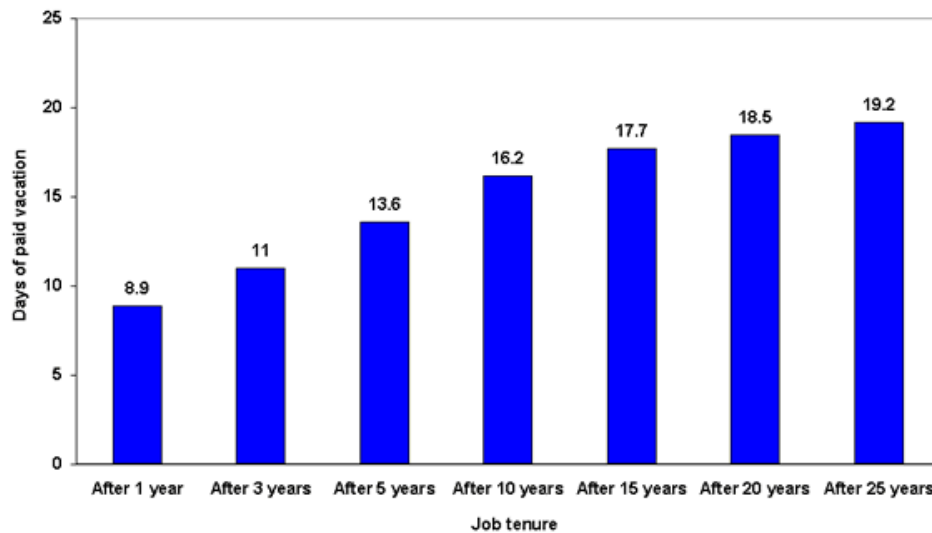
Statutory Minimum Annual Paid Vacation Days, by Country



Source: Alesina, Alberto et al

Our conversation moved to the concept of work ethic. As I proudly defended the importance of hard work and 50 plus hour weeks, he seemed perplexed. While he readily admitted desire, dedication, determination, and discipline were ingredients to success in the workplace, he stressed the importance of balance. In the 15 nations of the European Union, by law, all full time employees must be given a minimum of four weeks paid vacation per year; the same is true for part-time employees who have worked for at least 13 weeks. Let's compare this to the United States.

FIGURE A: Average number of paid vacation days, by length of job tenure in the United States*



* National Compensation Survey data.

Counting shorter work weeks and longer vacations, the average European gets nine weeks (350 hours) more free time than American's per year according to The Simplicity Forum.

Since the late 1970's, the expression of "work life balance" has emerged to make employees and employers aware that there needs to be a tradeoff between how one spends time and energy between work and home. Research has evidenced the perceived problems with excessive work. A Finnish-led study found that those working more than 55 hours a week had poorer mental skills than those who worked a standard work week.

Historical Perspective

The cultural norm placed on the positive value of doing a good job because work has intrinsic value for its own sake is a relatively recent development. From much of history, work ethic has had a negative connotation.

The Greeks viewed work as a curse. The Greek word for work was *ponos*, taken from the Latin *poena* which means sorrow. The Greek belief was that a person's wisdom and morality was directly proportional to their leisure time. A person who worked, when there was no need to do so, was blurring the line between slave and master. The philosopher Aristotle viewed work as a corrupt waste of time that would make a citizen's pursuit of virtue more difficult.

The Romans adopted a similar belief system to the Greeks. For the Romans, work was to be done by slaves. In both the Greek and Roman cultures, social status was related to the work a person did. Any pursuit of handicrafts or the use of one's arms was considered vulgar, dishonorable and beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen.

The fall of the Roman Empire marked the beginning of the period known Middle Ages (approximately 400 AD to 1400 AD). During this time period, work still held no intrinsic value. The function of work was solely to meet the physical needs of one's family and community. While work was frowned upon, wealth was recognized as an opportunity to share with those less fortunate.

As a result of the political and religious upheaval in western Europe in the 16th century, a new perspective on work evolved. It was believed that people could serve God through their work, that professions were useful, that work was the universal base of society and the reason behind differing social classes. It was understood that people should work diligently in their own occupation. They should not try to change from the profession in which they were born. Two key leaders influenced the development of the western culture during this period – Martin Luther and John Calvin. For Luther, a person's vocation was his calling. Calvin taught that all men must work, even the rich. Selection of an occupation and pursuing it to achieve the greatest possible profit was encouraged.

The early adventurers who first discovered America were searching, not for a place to work and build a new land, but for a new Eden where abundance and riches would allow them to follow Aristotle's view of the world. However, this mindset quickly changed as the New England Puritans and the Pennsylvania Quakers settled in America. Both brought the belief that life was one of hard work and determination. They approached the task of building a new world in the wilderness as an opportunity to prove their own moral worth.

When the Europeans visited the new world in the early 1800's, they were astounded by the work ethic of those who lived in America. By the mid-19th century, the idea of work as a calling had been replaced by the concept of public usefulness. People were lead to believe that poverty and decay would befall the country if people failed to demonstrate a positive work ethic. It was the social duty of each and every person to be productive. It was also believed that one could master his own fate through determination and discipline.

The Protestant work ethic made a positive case for work, but the negative connotations of work have come to the fore in the past three decades through the discussion of work-life balance.

Work ethic is truly a dilemma in the United States. Without work, most Americans would lose a significant part of our sense of purpose and social connection. Moreover, it is because of work that we can actually enjoy leisure time.

What is driving you to work so hard? Unfortunately, insecurity, inequality and the competitive nature of the US marketplace pushes people to work harder than ever. As you move ahead in your career, it is important that you consider the pluses and minuses of work ethic... is it a character trait which moves mountains or clouds one's perspective on life?

About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace