THE CHANGING AMERICAN WORK ETHIC-
WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Introduction

This paper will explore historical changes in the American work ethic since the seventeenth century (Puritan times) by dividing the past 350 year period into six distinctive work ethic periods and elaborating on the strengths and weaknesses of each period. In addition the paper will comment on the effects these changes have had on the U.S. economy, and recommend "improvements" in today's work ethic by introducing and elaborating on seven Biblical principles which pertain to the workplace. Obviously we will be generalizing and thus not all workers of the periods referenced exhibited the traits/ethics described. However we believe that the work traits described are generally applicable to the time periods referenced. The primary purpose of the paper is to stimulate discussion about America's current work ethic in order to generate recommendations to improve it.
There are six distinctly identifiable work ethics in the U.S. during the last 350-year period, and the labels, time periods, and brief descriptions are indicated in Exhibit One below. Most individuals today (including the author) have been influenced by each of these to one degree or another; and thus today's work ethic is a mixture of some or most of these. As the paper describes each of the work ethics and elaborates on the strengths and weaknesses, the reader should consider where he/she personally stands regarding each of these. The importance of studying each of these work ethics is to understand where they generate good as well as poor work habits in an effort to improve our own personal work habits.
Before the paper examines each work ethic, it will address six overarching themes identified as defining each era during the 350-year period.

1. **The prevalent work ethic in America has undergone a slow transition AWAY FROM A GOD-CENTERED ONE TOWARD A SELF-CENTERED ONE. This has negatively affected (a) productivity; (b) ethical behavior; and (c) relationships (particularly employer/employee).**
2. **There has been a gradual movement AWAY from a TRANSCENDENTAL/BIBLICALLY-BASED work ethic TOWARD a MATERIALISTIC-BASED/RELATIVISTIC one.**
3. **FAITH IN GOD has been gradually replaced by FAITH IN SELF.**
4. **Each of the first five work ethics mentioned below has influenced the ego-eclectic work ethic of the twenty-first century.**
5. **The importance of LOYALTY and COMMITMENT OVER FEELINGS has declined both from labor and from management.**
6. **Each of the six work ethics mentioned has a different method of ACHIEVING FULFILLMENT in the workplace.**

The final section before the conclusion lays out some of the fundamental principles of a Biblical work ethic and briefly comments on the effects of these principles on today's workplace.

Exhibit One- Contrasting American Work Ethics
(Seventeenth – Twentieth Centuries)

WORK ETHIC NAME	TIME PERIOD	DESCRIPTION
(1) Puritan	mid 1600 – early 1700	"Do all for the glory of God!"
(2) Craftsman	mid 1700 – mid 1800	"God helps those who help themselves!"
(3) Entrepreneur	mid 1800 – mid 1900	"The pursuit of wealth provides incentives for progress!"
(4) Career	mid 1900 – 1980	"Loyalty to the company is the source of security!"
(5) Self-fulfillment	1980 – 2000	"How will my work make ME happy?"
(6) Ego-eclectic--	2000+	"Whatever works best for ME is the best work ethic; only legitimate boundaries are self-imposed!"

Source: Burkett, Larry, *Business by the Book*, Thomas Nelson, 1998

The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Six American Work Ethics

As we develop each of these six work ethics, notice how the changes generally accelerate as we move closer to the present time. Of course not everyone who lived during the time period when each of these work ethics was prevalent possessed all of the characteristics of the work ethic, but our purpose is to identify the distinctiveness of each work ethic and comment on its strengths and weaknesses. Notice also how each work ethic has influenced the twenty-first century Ego-eclectic work ethic.

The Puritan Work Ethic

The earliest of the work ethics (or philosophies) in American was THE PURITAN WORK ETHIC, which had as its motto, "Do all for the glory of God." This work ethic was prevalent during most of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries and brought all work under the restraint of God's law as interpreted by His Scripture. The major characteristics of the Puritan Work Ethic included the following:

1. **WORK is part of the Creation Ordinance and is not a curse but a VIRTUE.**

2. **ALL WORK IS SIGNIFICANT, and all forms of work are pleasing to God if done properly.**
3. **MAN has a responsibility to USE his God-given gifts FOR GOD and should look for a CALLING FROM GOD (vocation).**
4. **The EMPLOYER – EMPLOYEE relationship should be a COOPERATIVE one because both have common goals- the glory of God.**
5. **WEALTH (profits) is ETHICALLY NEUTRAL and can be a blessing, a testing, or a curse.**
6. **FULFILLMENT is found in FAITHFULNESS AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD- THE BIBLE.**

The strengths of the Puritan Work Ethic are in its focus on individual responsibility and achievement, not at any cost, but under the constraint of God's rules and responsibilities. These rules and responsibilities, found in the Bible, were given to man in order to exercise proper stewardship <u>under God</u> so that God's creation would operate properly. The Puritan worker had a "moral compass" greater than his conscience, namely the Bible. This moral compass when combined with a purpose to serve an unchanging God gave the Puritan a powerful motive to literally "be all that he could be." By the way, cooperation between employer and employee meant proper submission where "each considered the other more important than himself."
The weakness of, or problem with, the Puritan ethic was the difficulty for sinful man to recognize and capitulate to God's sovereignty. Today each man wants to "do what is right in his own eyes," and conventional wisdom seems to reject any attempt to promote any system of ethical absolutes. Instead, man picks and chooses his ethics according to what fits his circumstances best (Ego-eclecticism).

The Craftsman Work Ethic

As Exhibit One points out, this work ethic had as its motto: "God helps those who help themselves." It began to seep into America shortly after the beginning of the eighteenth century and probably became the predominate work ethic between the end of the Revolutionary War and the end of the eighteenth century. The characteristics of the Craftsman work ethic included:

1. **MAN'S INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS are of SUPREME SIGNIFICANCE (ie. work is important for work itself).**
2. **God has given man a set of NATURAL LAWS which man can use to properly GOVERN himself. (The need for an active God has passed, and man is basically in control of his own destiny.) This characteristic fits in with the "age of enlightenment" and the general deistic approach to life.**
3. **WORK is more of an OPPORTUNITY TO "EXALT ONESELF" rather than to glorify God (the beginning of the secularization of work).**

4. **ACHIEVEMENT is basically IN RELATION TO OTHERS, and sometimes at the expense of others.**
5. **FULFILLMENT is found in, "DOING THE BEST JOB YOU CAN given the circumstances."**

The strengths of this work ethic lie in the pursuit of excellence as a goal and the drive to master God's natural laws.
The weakness is that the interpretation of the natural laws and their applications falls under man, not under God, so that man is basically working for recognition of his fellow man rather than for God. Notice how selfishness begins to slowly rear its ugly head, and this will be seen even more in the next basic work ethic- the Entrepreneur.

The Entrepreneur Work Ethic

Sometime around the mid-nineteenth century, this work ethic began to gain dominance. The pillars of it included:

1. **MATERIAL PROGRESS helps everyone to enjoy a HIGHER STANDARD OF LIVING.**
2. **The PURSUIT OF WEALTH provides incentives for progress, and material incentives are of utmost importance in generating productivity and innovation.**
3. **LEGAL STANDARDS begin to REPLACE the BIBLE as the SOURCE OF ETHICAL STANDARDS.**
4. **There is increasing ALIENATION BETWEEN EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE.**
5. **FULFILLMENT is found in WEALTH GENERATION in order to enjoy a higher standard of living.**

The strength of the Entrepreneur work ethic lies in its focus on innovation which when done properly leads to consumer satisfaction and economic efficiency. In addition individual responsibility is fostered by this work ethic.
Weaknesses begin with the basic materialistic philosophy which generally drives and motivates both employers and employees. This will lead to problems ranging from greed to alienation between employer and employee in the workplace. It is no accident that labor unions began and grew during the period when this work ethic gained dominance, and the Marxist-Leninist brand of socialism began to rear its ugly head. As Colson and Eckerd note in their book, *Why America Doesn't Work*, the disciplines of the Puritan way of life were gradually shaken off, and the doctrine of the secular calling (vocation) was replaced by a "hollowed-out version of the work ethic" appropriately named "occupation." "People still worked hard, but for

different reasons. God was no longer the sacred object of man's labors; instead, labor itself became the shrine. A typical exponent of this new (more) secular ethic was Calvin Coolidge, who said, 'He who builds a factory builds a temple, and he who works there, worships there.'" (See Colson and Eckerd, pp. 39-40.) This seems to elevate the industrialist to the god-head.

Career Work Ethic

The Career Work Ethic grew significantly in influence immediately following World War II and continued well into the 1980s. Its chief characteristics included:

1. LOYALTY TO THE COMPANY is the SOURCE OF PERSONAL SECURITY.
2. To SUCCEED in the system, you must be a TEAM PLAYER. Scale the corporate ladder each day; retreat to home at night. (Notice the rise in the entertainment industry during this period.)
3. HITCH YOUR CAREER TO A GROWING COMPANY and enjoy increasing levels of influence, responsibility, and wealth.
4. WORK IS NO LONGER ENNOBLING. The VOCATION (calling) becomes an OCCUPATION (eg. "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.").
5. FULFILLMENT is found in ADVANCING UP THE CORPORATE LADDER.

One of the greatest strengths of this work ethic is also one of its distinct weaknesses- the unconditional loyalty to the company. This admirable trait (company loyalty) can pay huge dividends if constrained and channeled properly. On the other hand, if not constrained, it can lead to group-think and ethical compromise which have surfaced in both government and the private sector during the past several decades. Also the degree of manipulation grows considerably under this ethic as those in authority use their authority to control their subordinates; and the subordinates are reluctant to honestly advise their superiors.

The Self-Fulfillment Work Ethic

The Self-Fulfillment ethic gradually gained acceptance during the 1980s as the problems inherent in the Career Ethic began to be exposed. The characteristics listed below summarize this work ethic.

1. WORK is a vehicle for INDIVIDUAL HAPPINESS.
2. The SHORT TERM EFFECTS of behavior are MORE IMPORTANT THAN LONG TERM CONSEQUENCES.
3. EARLY RETIREMENT is a major goal of work.

4. **HAPPINESS is based on "what YOU can get out of it." "GREED IS HEALTHY." "WIN regardless of the cost."**
5. **There is a LACK OF TRANSCENDENTAL VALUES especially for ethical decisions.**
6. **FULFILLMENT is found in HAPPINESS which is tied to GETTING THE MOST FOR THE LEAST EFFORT. (Work smart, not hard!)**

By focusing on enjoyment and pleasure, work under this ethic became integrated into overall lifestyle including family (and this has many healthy overtones); but the problem was that the effects of work on happiness depended on each individual's concept of freedom, happiness, and responsibility; and too often this meant taking ethical shortcuts and even compromises.

Ego-eclectic Work Ethic

This final category of work ethics began to gain a foothold sometime near the end of the twentieth century and was a natural extension of the postmodern philosophy which gained a strong grip on society during the final decade of the twentieth century. It can be summed up in the statement, "Whatever works best for me is the best work ethic." Notice how the characteristics listed below fit into this summary statement.

1. **The only LEGITIMATE BOUNDARIES are SELF-IMPOSED ones.**
2. **ALL TRUTHS, including work-related ones, are RELATIVE (non-universal).**
3. **WORK is primarily for self-fulfillment and is very PERSONAL.**
4. **FULFILLMENT is found in ACHIEVING SELF-GENERATED GOALS REGARDLESS OF WHAT OTHERS THINK!**

This work ethic seems to pick up many of the weaknesses of the previous five and attempt to justify them in a philosophy that focuses on ME and allows wide latitude in behavior. Individualism is unbridled and as such works against a productive, enjoyable, character-building workplace. Contrast this and the previous five work ethics with the Biblical Work Ethic as stated below and with the Puritan Work Ethic where the focus is "glorifying God through obedience to His principles as delineated in His Word." The reader should beware of the tendency toward an "evolutionary philosophy" regarding work ethics, namely that each succeeding one is an improvement over the preceding one. C.S. Lewis in his autobiography used the term "Chronological Snobbery" to describe the basic idea that "later is always better." (See C.S. Lewis, "Surprised by Joy," pp. 207-208.)
This paper will close its brief discussion of the American work ethic with a look at seven Biblical principles which apply to the workplace.

The Biblical Work Ethic

1. **WORK is a CREATION MANDATE FOR MANKIND, but it is to be done UNDER GOD (IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S LAWS).**
2. **A proper work ethic is based on PROPER RELATIONSHIPS with GOD, with family, with supervisors, with subordinates, and with coworkers.**
3. **Work is an opportunity to be a POSITIVE IMAGE-BEARER of God. The HOW IS MORE IMPORTANT, and the results will take care of themselves.**
4. **Hard work, diligence, respect for property, and thrift are all important attributes.**
5. **The principle of STEWARDSHIP should guide man's behavior- GOD is the OWNER and MAN is the AGENT.**
6. **LOYALTY, SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITY, and PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT are all important parts of the Biblical work ethic.**
7. **FULFILLMENT is based on PLEASING GOD as indicated in following Biblical principles and in hearing "Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."**

Each of these seven Biblical Principles (and they are not meant to be exhaustive) is significant to a proper functioning workplace. We will briefly examine each one and note where it applied in the previously identified six work ethics.

Principle Number One is foundational in the attitude of the person in the workplace. The Biblical view of work is that it is a CALLING and is important regardless of the value society puts on the labor. This was one of the distinctives of the reformation: that ALL work matters. In addition the standards for work "well done" are determined by God and are transcendent in time and place. Of course this principle was central to the Puritan concept of work and is embodied in Colossians 3: 23-24: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Also we might add that God cannot be deceived regarding work as can a human supervisor.

Principle Number Two concerns proper relationships with not only God but also with family and coworkers (including supervisors and subordinates). Sinners will always have difficulty in dealing properly with others because everything is focused on self. When Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment," he replied, "...to love the Lord God with all your heart...and to love your neighbor as yourself." (See Matthew 22: 36-40.) Relationships within the workplace began to steadily deteriorate under the Entrepreneur Work Ethic as alienation between employer and employee replaced common goals to serve customers and "show thyself a workman approved." (See II Timothy 2:15.) We do not have the space to address this topic fully, but needless to say developing

and maintaining respect and dignity in the workplace is one of the primary vehicles for success. (See R.C. Sproul, "*Stronger Than Steel*.")

Principle Number Three reminds us of the sovereignty of God and our utter dependence on Him for results. While He has given us principles and other tools to exercise our sovereignty, our responsibility is to use those principles and tools properly. This may entail forgoing short term profits in order to do what He says is right even if this is contrary to what competitors are doing or what conventional wisdom says is proper. Sacrificing the bottom line in the short run to be honest with and to protect the consumer or to protect and show respect to the employee will usually generate long term dividends in terms of customer and employee loyalty. The key here is that profits are not the only nor most important measuring stick to success.

Principle Number Four involves going beyond the minimum or even the normal effort because the worker is working for God as well as for his employer and second-best is unsatisfactory. The worker is to bring his "first-fruits" to the workplace as his offering to the God who made him and invested him with all of his abilities and opportunities. Property is to be respected regardless of who it belongs to because ultimately all of it belongs to God. Thrift is necessary to deal responsibly with the uncertainties of life.

Principle Number Five requires man to "think like God" when making decisions, but how does God think? This is where knowledge of the Bible and application of its principles in one's life is so important. Most Business Administration-related textbooks elaborate on the Principle-Agent problem in decision-making where owners and managers come at decisions with different agendas. This same problem occurs where an individual views work not as a stewardship responsibility to God but only as an opportunity for self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement.

The Biblical principle of Loyalty and Submission to Authority (number six) is well- documented. (See I Peter 2: 18-19; Proverbs 20:6.) This principle flows both ways in that the supervisor is to exhibit loyalty and submission to the boss and is to exercise authority properly toward his subordinates. Thus a spirit of cooperation and mutual support should trump any tendency toward selfishness and adversarial positions, and a true spirit of trust is fostered instead of a spirit of "trust" based on fear. (See particularly the Career work ethic.)

The final Biblical principle (Pleasing God) is an overarching one which under-girds all of the others and replaces the tendency to focus on self with the tendency to focus on a sovereign God who, "is always working for the good of those who are called according to His purposes." (See Romans 8:28.) This helps to keep workers from being controlled by circumstances and instead helps the workers control their own circumstances. Needless to say this will improve

productivity and relationships in the workplace as well as in the lives of everyone.

Conclusion

In this article we have briefly looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the six basic work ethics defining America since the settlement of the Puritans in the mid-seventeenth century. We have also taken a cursory look at a limited number of Biblical work-related principles which can have, if followed, significant effects on productivity, relationships, and the general atmosphere within the workplace. As stated in the introduction, the primary purpose of the paper is to inform and stimulate discussion in order to improve the American work ethic which has such a significant impact on America's quality of life. If the changes and trends in the American work ethic mentioned in this paper are true, the question of "Where do we go from here?" is of utmost importance. Appropriate business policies are a start, but certainly are not enough. What is needed is a change in corporate culture brought about by proper example and relationships that are FOCUSED ON OTHERS rather than on SELF. A good beginning is understanding and applying the Biblical principles mentioned in the preceding section.

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