

**Work Ethic and Employment Status:  
A Study of Jobseekers**

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Although there have been numerous changes within the workplace during the past century, employers continue to search for employees with a strong work ethic. Employers often cite a strong work ethic as the most desired characteristic in a new employee (Denka, 1994; Hill & Petty, 1995; Young, 1986). Work ethic can be described as a set of characteristics and attitudes in which an individual worker assigns importance and merit to work. Those with a strong work ethic place a positive value on doing a good job and describe work as having an intrinsic value of its own (Cherrington, 1980; Yankelovich & Immerwahr, 1984). Employers seek employees who are dependable, have good interpersonal skills, and demonstrate initiative. Prior research has associated these characteristics with a high level of work ethic (Hill & Petty).

Employers value a strong work ethic because of the economic benefits it provides to business (Ali & Falcone, 1995). Businesses with employees who are committed to work have a market advantage. Furthermore, when a new hire does not have sufficient commitment to work and lacks dependability, interpersonal skills, or initiative the organization is at risk of losing productivity and profits.

Even in good economic times many able-bodied people are unemployed (Shimko, 1992). Many of the chronically long-term unemployed—that is, unemployed for three months or longer—include public assistance recipients, older homemakers entering the workforce, young black males, members of other minority groups, the handicapped, and individuals with criminal records.

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The cycle of the long-term unemployed includes periods of unemployment, short-term work, public assistance, and then a return to unemployment (Blunt & Richards, 1998).

Many see unemployment as a vice (Beder, 2000), and those who do not work tend to be viewed as lazy and unmotivated by American society. Furthermore, there is a belief that there are plenty of jobs for the unemployed (Sennett, 1998) and that those who are unemployed are not truly committed to seeking work. Employers sometimes assume that the long-termed unemployed are opposed to hard work or feel the unemployed lack the necessary work experience to develop a high level of work ethic (Blunt & Richards, 1998). In addition, some employers believe that welfare recipients not only lack a work ethic, but also bring up children who fail to develop an adequate work ethic (Beder, 2001).

Not all unemployed persons are viewed the same, however, and the circumstances that led to the unemployment can have a significant impact on the employer's perceptions of an individual's work ethic. Those who are unemployed because of a plant closure or layoff are viewed differently from other unemployed people. Downsizing and plant closures are seen as changes in the economy that are unrelated to the individual's work ethic (Sennett, 1998). Job loss in manufacturing is associated with the mechanization and computerization of the workplace (Applebaum, 1998). Unemployment due to a plant closure or downsizing does not carry the negative stigma associated with unemployment of other types. These workers are not viewed as unemployed due to their lack of work ethic, but for reasons beyond their control.

Employers also see distinctions in the work ethic of different age groups. One view, articulated by Filipczak (1994), is that 18-35 year old employees are lazy and cynical. They are viewed as being uninterested in work as a way of life and as having no commitment to companies or organizations. Often referred to as Generation X, persons in this age group tend to be less loyal and change jobs more often (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). Managers often feel that they are parenting these workers (Filipczak), and many managers prefer not to work with this group. Tulgan (1996) offers another view: Generation X is not

disloyal but, as a generation, has no experience of loyalty by companies toward workers. "X'ers" want to create valuable results, and their sense of loyalty is focused on adding value. Another feature of this generation is that of risk taking. The world of Generation X has been one of constant change; therefore, Generation X believes that nothing will last forever and change is inevitable. They are, therefore, less likely to adhere to a traditional concept of work ethic than prior generations of the work force.

A second group of employees, those aged 36-50, are sometimes referred to as Boomers. When compared to employees in other age groups, Boomers are viewed as having a stronger work ethic, as placing a higher value on work, as valuing coworkers more, as missing fewer work days, as being more dedicated, and as having lower accident rates (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). A third age group, those over age 50 and known as Matures, are said to exhibit employer loyalty, to value comfort and security, and to be better team players than Boomers or "X'ers" (Jurkiewicz & Brown). Employers view Matures as hard working and conformist. Matures have more absences than Boomers, but less absenteeism than "X'ers" (Manz & Grothe, 1991). There is speculation that these absences are a product of the health status of this group. Furnham (1987) found that this group was more likely to be characterized by a strong work ethic, while at the same time they looked forward toward leisure activities and retirement.

Prior research has also indicated differences in work ethic between men and women. Cherrington (1980) reported women scored higher than men on pride in doing a job well and on working hard. Other studies also supported differences in work ethic between men and women. Hill (1992) reported women scored higher than men on all the subscales of the Occupational Work Ethic Inventory (OWEI) in a workplace study. Wentworth and Chell (1997) studied work ethic and college students and found female students had higher Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) scores than male students.

While the work ethic literature has reported work ethic differences by age and gender within the general population, research focused on the work ethic attitudes of unemployed

persons is sparse. This is a significant problem from a practical perspective because workforce education professionals whose clientele are the unemployed lack the necessary data to make informed decisions about how work ethic should be addressed within their programs. Work ethic beliefs are an important topic for any workforce education program (Hill & Petty, 1995), since understanding the tendencies and attitudes within a particular clientele group can assist in planning and developing effective interventions. This study addressed the work ethic beliefs of unemployed workers in order to contribute information to the field of workforce education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in work ethic as measured by the OWEI for respondent jobseekers grouped by employment status, age, and gender of jobseekers. Levels of the first independent variable, employment status, were (a) unemployed (both long and short term), (b) employed full-time, and (c) employed part-time. The second independent variable, age, included groupings for (a) 16-29 year olds, (b) 30-39 year olds, (c) 40-49 year olds, and (d) those 50 years old and older. The dependent variable was work ethic, operationally characterized by (a) dependability, (b) interpersonal skills, and (c) initiative.

This study examined the following research questions:

1. Are there differences in work ethic attributes of dependability, initiative, and interpersonal skills among jobseekers grouped by employment status?
2. Are there differences in work ethic attributes of dependability, initiative, and interpersonal skills among jobseeker grouped by age?
3. Are there differences in work ethic attributes of dependability, initiative, and interpersonal skills among jobseekers grouped by gender?

### **Method**

The research design was ex-post facto and involved the use of a Web-based survey. The sampling unit consisted of jobseekers who utilized the services of a county employment center in a southeastern state. At the employment center, a

publicly funded program matched employers with qualified employees and prepared workers to meet employer qualifications. Employment counselors asked all jobseekers using the center to complete an online version of the OWEI.

To collect the data for this study, the researcher who initiated the study contacted the Webmaster for *The Work Ethic Site* (<http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic>) for advice and assistance with online administration of the OWEI. The Webmaster had worked with school systems and other researchers since developing this Web site as part of a research project funded in 1996 and had facilitated data collection using Common Gateway Interface (CGI) scripts on the Web site. For purposes of this study, a special entry section was provided and hyperlinked from the research Web page. The entry section was password-protected and provided instructions and human subjects' information prior to displaying the online OWEI. As the online instruments were completed and submitted, data was compiled in a file on the Web server. This data file was then shared with the researchers involved with the project and used for data analysis.

Computers for use by participants in the study were provided on site at the employment center. No special software was required other than a Web browser. Participants were given guidance as needed to navigate to the online instrument and provided with the password necessary to enter the site. They were assured that there were no inherent risks or threats involved in the process and encouraged to be honest in responding to the items on the OWEI. With each administration of the survey instrument, a participant began by entering the demographic data corresponding to the independent variables for the study and then responded to the 50 items on the OWEI. Only minimal computer skills were needed to complete the Web-based version of the OWEI, such as clicking radio buttons to indicate selected responses, and assistance was available during the administration of the instrument if participants had questions about computer operation or other aspects of completing the process.

#### *Population and Sample*

This study took place in a growing county with approximately 54,000 citizens located in a southeastern state.

The county population increased by 15% between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Approximately 44% of the population was active in the labor force, and over 51% of the workforce was employed in the service or retail industry. The mean per-capita personal income was \$22,407 annually. At the time of this study there were 24,101 individuals employed, with approximately 4,600 of these working part-time. During 2000 approximately 1,500 individuals in this county were laid off from work (North Carolina Employment Security Commission, 2002).

The employment center was the first operational unit of its type in the state. From July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001, approximately 5,500 people used the center to look for work. The individuals using this employment center could be divided into five groups: (a) employed full-time, (b) employed part-time, (c) unemployed for reason other than layoff (less than 90 days), (d) unemployed for reason other than layoff (more than 90 days), and (e) unemployed due to layoff.

The study sample consisted of 373 jobseekers who used the employment center from May 1, 2003 until September 1, 2003. The sample size was determined by the method described by Cohen (1988). For purposes of analysis of the data, statistical power was set at .90 with an effect size of .25 and the level of significance at .05. A minimum sample size of 58 subjects within each employment category was required to meet these criteria.

#### *Research Instrument*

The OWEI developed by Gregory C. Petty at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville was used for this study (Petty, 1991, 1993). The OWEI has been used in previous studies by Hatcher (1993), Hill (1992, 1997), Hill and Rojewski (1999), Petty and Hill (1994), Petty (1995), Hill and Petty (1995), Sullivan (1999), and Tydings (2003). The instrument poses the stem, "As a worker I can describe myself as", followed by a seven-point Likert-type scale for rating each item with 1 (*never*); 2 (*almost never*); 3 (*seldom*); 4 (*sometimes*); 5 (*usually*); 6 (*almost always*); and 7 (*always*). Instrument items consist of 50 one- or two-word descriptors that represent key work ethic and work attitude concepts identified from previous work ethic research. To provide an interpretation of the OWEI for comparative purposes,

previously established subscales were used in analysis of the data (Hill & Petty, 1995). These subscales were labeled *interpersonal skills*, *initiative*, and *being dependable*.

Additional studies focusing on the validity of the OWEI have been reported (Dawson, 1999; Brauchle & Azam, 2004). In the most recent of these, Brauchle and Azam (2004) concluded that the OWEI “factors are replicable in different populations and that evidence exists for construct validity of this instrument” (p. 128). Their work also included a comparison between a self-reported response set using the OWEI and a data set collected from industrial supervisors using the OWEI to rate the workers who provided the self-report data. The results of this study led them to conclude that “irrespective of evaluation method, the constructs of the OWEI are replicable” (Brauchle & Azam, 2004, p. 129).

Internal reliability for each of the OWEI factors was examined by computing Cronbach’s coefficient alpha statistics for participant responses. These reliability coefficients are indicators of error variance in a scale or test. The internal consistency of responses gathered in this study was acceptable for interpersonal skills ( $r = .90$ ), initiative ( $r = .88$ ), and being dependable ( $r = .78$ ).

#### *Data Analysis*

For purposes of this study, the subscales on the OWEI were treated as distinct measures. Hill and Petty (1995) identified the factors of dependability, interpersonal skills, and initiative as distinct facets of the overall construct of work ethic. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). For each OWEI subscale an analysis of variance was performed to determine significance at an alpha of 0.05. If significant  $F$ -tests were computed, a Tukey test was performed to determine specific group differences where more than two groupings were used for the independent variable.

### **Results**

Table 1 presents frequency counts and percentages for the 373 study participants grouped by employment status. All categories of the independent variable met the criteria for sample size and power calculations. Part-time workers comprised the

smallest group within the sample, while other categories were relatively equal in size.

Frequency counts and percentages for respondents grouped by age are provided in Table 2. More participants in the 16-29 age group contributed to the study, but the overall distribution across age categories was well dispersed.

**Table 1**

*Frequency Count and Percentage of Respondents by Employment Status*

Employment Status	Frequency	Percentage
Employed full-time	77	20.6
Employed part-time	59	15.8
Unemployed less than 3 months	86	23.1
Unemployed 3 months or more	70	18.8
Unemployed due to layoff	81	21.7

**Table 2**

*Frequency Count and Percentage of Respondents by Age Category*

Age	Frequency	Percentage
16-29	131	35.1
30-39	93	24.9
40-49	74	19.8
50 and over	75	20.1

Distribution by gender was fairly balanced with 195 (52.3%) female respondents and 178 (47.7%) male respondents. All predetermined criteria for the study sample were met, and the



respondents' demographic characteristics were well distributed across all attributes of interest.

To test the first research question, statistical tests were computed to examine differences in work ethic attributes of dependability, initiative, and interpersonal skills among jobseekers grouped by employment status. Table 3 provides the results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) calculations for each of the three dependent variables comprising the OWEI subscales. Results of the ANOVA used to investigate these responses indicated significant differences for dependability ( $F = 5.2$ ;  $p < .000$ ), interpersonal skills ( $F = 4.4$ ;  $p < .002$ ), and initiative ( $F = 4.6$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 3**

*Univariate Analysis of Variance Results for OWEI Subscale Responses for the Factor of Employment Status*

ETA Source squared	<i>df</i>	SS-Between	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	
Dependable	4	11.25	5.2		.000*
	.054				
Interpersonal	4	7.03	4.4	.002*	.046
Initiative	4	11.25	4.6	.001*	.047

\*  $p < .05$

Since there were more than two levels on the independent variable, a follow-up pair wise comparison test was needed to determine the source of significant differences detected by the ANOVA. There were five levels of the independent variable employment status, but significant results on the ANOVA should not be interpreted as meaning each level was significantly different from the other. Table 4 presents the results of a Tukey test used to identify how mean scores differed across the five

levels of this independent variable. Mean scores sharing a common subscript in a row of this table were not significantly different at the .05 level.

**Table 4**  
*Work Ethic among Jobseekers Grouped by Employment Status*

Work Ethic Scale	Employment Status				
	Employed full-time	Employed part-time	Unemployed < 3 months	Unemployed >3 months	due to layoff
Dependability	5.237 <sub>a</sub>	5.512 <sub>ab</sub>	5.637 <sub>b</sub>	5.434 <sub>ab</sub>	5.699 <sub>b</sub>
Interpersonal Skills	4.641 <sub>a</sub>	4.901 <sub>ab</sub>	5.024 <sub>b</sub>	4.834 <sub>ab</sub>	4.971 <sub>b</sub>
Initiative	5.027 <sub>a</sub>	5.290 <sub>ab</sub>	5.496 <sub>b</sub>	5.224 <sub>ab</sub>	5.550 <sub>b</sub>

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.

Jobseeking individuals employed full-time had significantly lower work ethic scores than jobseekers unemployed less than 3 months and jobseekers unemployed due to layoff. These results were consistent for each of the subscale scores—dependability, interpersonal skills, and initiative. Mean scores for full-time employed workers were numerically less than mean scores for each of the other four categories of workers on each of the three OWEI subscales. Differences between employed part-time and unemployed more than 3 months were not verified as significant by the Tukey test.

ANOVA statistics were also computed for respondent data grouped by age and gender but no statistically significant differences were detected. The ANOVA for data grouped by age produced the following results:  $F = 1.71$ ,  $p < .150$  for

dependability,  $F = .42$ ,  $p < .790$  for interpersonal skills, and  $F = 2.20$ ,  $p < .070$  for initiative. For data grouped to compare women respondents to men respondents, the ANOVA results were as follows:  $F = .50$ ,  $p < .450$  for dependability,  $F = .10$ ,  $p < .750$  for interpersonal skills, and  $F = .09$ ,  $p < .763$  for initiative. Since no significant differences were indicated for response data grouped by age or gender, follow-up statistical analyses were not necessary.

### Discussion

Since this study was limited to a single employment center, the findings may not be representative of all jobseekers. However, this study provided data on the work ethic of a previously unexamined group and established a basis for future research. The small geographic area of the study provided a homogenous economy, and the study participants faced a uniform scarcity of employment. Given the paucity of research on work ethic attributes of unemployed persons, this study was significant, but each reader will have to determine the extent to which the results might be relevant to the characteristics of their own clientele.

The key finding revealed by this study was that jobseeking individuals employed full-time had significantly lower work ethic scores than jobseekers unemployed less than 3 months and than jobseekers unemployed due to layoff. Variance was not so great as to be deemed significantly different between workers who had part-time employment and those who had been unemployed for more than 3 months. This reveals an interesting dynamic for those seeking to assist jobseekers in their search for new employment opportunities.

First of all, for the jobseeker who is employed, tendencies toward lower levels of dependability, interpersonal skills, and initiative could have a negative impact on the search for a new job. The source of this pattern was not determined by data analyzed for this study, but it is likely caused by a combination of dissatisfaction with a current work situation and some level of disillusionment with work in general.

Work experiences of individuals strongly influence development of work ethic (Mulligan, 1997). Persons who have

successfully negotiated finding employment and fulfilling job responsibilities tend to view work more favorably than those who have had disappointments related to work. It might, then, also be concluded that persons who had acquired employment but were in a work situation that was somehow undesirable would experience negative feelings towards work ethic.

In the case of jobseekers unemployed less than 3 months or who were unemployed due to layoff, work ethic measured higher in this study. These workers were likely exhibiting work ethic attributes influenced by favorable work experiences. Even though no longer employed, their work experiences were recent enough to influence their attitudes, and they maintained work ethic attributes that would be an asset as they pursued new employment opportunities.

Phenomena explained by expectancy theory might also be reflected in this finding. Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1994) describes how people are motivated to seek an outcome based on anticipated second-order outcomes or rewards. Behaviors are influenced by a combination of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (strength of desirability). In the case of jobseekers who were recently unemployed or laid off from their jobs, the strength of their responses on the OWEI might have been influenced by favorable expectations for future employment, confidence that employment was possible, and assurance that they could manage job requirements as well as personal and family responsibilities related to employment.

Another explanation for the higher scores recorded for those unemployed less than three months and those unemployed due to layoff might be that they self-reported positive attributes to impress those who might see the OWEI results. Two points should be considered, however, with respect to this interpretation of the results. First, the OWEI results were not made available to job center personnel and it was evident from the data collection procedures that data would not be associated with individuals once it was submitted using the Web interface. In addition, the work by Brauchle and Azam (2004) cited previously provided evidence that the self-report data provided by the OWEI was consistent with supervisor report data in their investigation of this instrument.

The lack of significant work ethic differences found when jobseekers were grouped by age and gender also contributes to the knowledge base of work-related research. Prior studies have detected work ethic differences for both of these variables for a broad cross-section of employed workers (Hill, 1997), particularly for gender and, to a lesser degree, for age. The current study, however, suggests that the process of seeking employment involves dynamics that override or filter age or gender-related differences in work ethic.

### **Recommendations**

A prospective employee's work ethic can influence his or her success in obtaining for new employment. Because the current study was conducted within the context of a county employment center, it is appropriate to consider ramifications of the study for job skills counselors and career educators. The key finding of significant differences in work ethic between employed jobseekers and recently unemployed or laid off workers contradicts some natural assumptions. It might be assumed that anyone who has a job would exhibit higher work ethic attributes than persons not presently employed, but for participants in this study that was not the case. Awareness of this finding would be beneficial to persons designing employment education as well as those involved in placement activities.

For jobseekers exhibiting lower work ethic attributes, interventions that would raise their awareness of the tendencies revealed by this study as well as the ramifications reported in prior research studies could be beneficial. Employed jobseekers should be encouraged to monitor their own work performance. While they might be in job situations in which they do not plan to remain, job responsibilities should be fulfilled in ways that do not jeopardize future opportunities.

Counselors should highlight employed jobseekers successes in order to provide them encouragement and enhance their self-confidence. Counselors should remind those jobseekers who have successfully arranged transportation, childcare, and other critical family factors to accommodate a work schedule that they have fulfilled some of the key requirements for successful employment. Likewise they should inform individuals who have

failed to make these arrangements that they have additional tasks to consider as jobseekers. Employment programs should provide developmental activities for all participants in order to help them address problem-solving skills associated with managing the multiple priorities associated with working. Without these skills, work ethic attributes of dependability, interpersonal skills, and initiative can be subrogated by concerns for family members needing care or practical issues that impede work success.

Findings in this study also provide insights for employers and supervisors. Good supervision plays a role in encouraging or suppressing behaviors associated with a strong work ethic (Cherrington, 1980). By praising workers' expressions of positive work ethic attributes, supervisors can encourage productive work in their employees and at the same time help accomplish organizational goals. When seeking new hires, employers should keep in mind that jobseekers recently unemployed or recently laid off have likely resolved challenges associated with family and personal responsibilities, and combined with a strong work ethic, they are prime candidates for employment. Employers should be on the lookout for recently unemployed or laid off jobseekers, and supervisors should encourage and support these persons when they are hired.

Employers and supervisors should also be aware when they have workers who are seeking other employment. Although it would be inappropriate to generalize the findings of the current study to all persons, this study provides evidence that employed jobseekers can exhibit lower levels of work ethic. Because a poor work ethic can affect productivity, supervisors should keep a close eye on jobseeking employees, particularly when these employees bear mission-critical responsibilities. In instances where it would benefit the organization to retain the employment of a jobseeker, supervisors should take steps to encourage and affirm the jobseeker. Increased levels of support could result in retention of a valued employee whom the organization might otherwise lose.

At the same time, supervisors should take care to avoid negative overreactions to lower levels of work ethic that they might observe in workers seeking other employment, particularly when they wish to retain that worker. It is possible that employed

jobseekers are unaware of a reduction in their own work ethic, in which case an overly critical approach by an employer or supervisor could elicit a further negative reaction. Although this study reveals that a lessening of the work ethic may occur in jobseeking employees, further research is needed to fully understand this dynamic. The data analyzed for this research project were not directed toward revealing the causes for the phenomena observed.

Regardless of the underlying causes for the work ethic differences detected by this study, work ethic will continue to play a vital role in the success of people at work in a technological world. Employers continue to seek employees who have strong attributes related to dependability, interpersonal skills, and initiative. The importance of these work ethic factors will continue to grow as technology creates autonomy in the workplace and teamwork and participatory management styles are implemented. Technical competence will never be sufficient to assure successful job performance, and all workforce preparation programs should include comprehensive content that includes a work ethic component.

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