



# The Disappearing Work Ethic

Fact or Fiction?

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Some insight into the public's perception of the state of the work ethic in this province was recently provided by The Telegram newspaper which published an article about the NLEC's survey of the effects of Employment Insurance (EI) and Workers' Compensation on the workplace (Wangersky, 2009). This comment was posted on The Telegram website in response to Mr. Wangersky's article:

I hope this study takes a good look at what's going on outside the overpass. Where pogeys has become a way of life. Whole industries are set up around gettin yer stamps. Work ethic? What a joke! Most people in the fishing industry in this province work for a few weeks a year then heave off on the federal dole for the next ten months. EI has been the ruination of this province! (Taxpayer II, 2009)

People often refer to the fishery and other seasonal industries to portray residents of this province as a drain on the real, tax-paying workers. In reality, before the advent of EI, seasonal workers performed the same tasks in the off-season as they do now—cutting wood for winter heating, replacing shingles on roofs, and planting vegetable gardens to feed their families. The true difference EI has made in the lives of these workers is that, although their job is unpredictable with no guaranteed or consistent income, they no longer have to fear that their children will go to bed cold and hungry.

Seasonal work leads to high unemployment rates. Workers' Compensation programs are subject to abuse. There have always been people who manipulate the system. Last month, a study in the United Kingdom claimed that "benefits wrecked the British work ethic" when it found that the percentage of citizens who thought it acceptable to fraudulently claim EI or other benefits rose with a decrease in age (Doughty, 2009). Linking such findings to a

disappearing work ethic oversimplifies the issues. In fact, a similar article appeared in the 1973 issue of *The Labour Gazette* entitled “The Work Ethic—is it dead?” (Campbell, 1973). Evidence that a work ethic continues to thrive in this province exists. Many students in the College of the North Atlantic’s academically challenging Business Management Program have part-time jobs while maintaining A and B averages. Other students are single parents who don’t want to rely on government handouts all their lives. These individuals obviously have a strong work ethic.

So where do things go wrong?

Both sides of the employer/employee relationship share responsibility. Young people no longer want to sacrifice personal life for professional life, particularly in an economic climate where recessions and mergers can mean job losses. They fear the stress-related illnesses common in their parents’ generation (Harper, 2006). Most employers would also agree that the level of commitment expected of employees in the past was unreasonable. Unfortunately, many young people confuse not sacrificing personal life with sacrificing professional life. Some have unrealistic expectations fueled by pseudo-celebrities who become rich and famous with little work effort or even worse, with bad behavior.

But employers aren’t entirely blameless. There are always changes in the business world. Only a few years ago casual dressing was the trend — to the horror of some employers—but in time, business attire became the standard again. The challenge for a successful business is to adapt to trends without over-reacting, and to realize, as Carl Gilleard, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters says, how far to lean over backwards without ending up horizontal (Asthana,2008).

There are three key areas for the employer: recognizing employee needs, training employees for advancement, and leading by example. It's common in Newfoundland and Labrador to blame poor personnel retention rates on the inability to pay competitive salaries. In some instances, this is true. But study after study shows that employees rate opportunities for advancement, benefits, and child care facilities at least as high as or even higher than money when it comes to job satisfaction. In response to the needs of today's workforce, Procter and Gamble, for example, no longer stresses higher salaries; it emphasizes the ability to balance work and life with flexible hours, and up to a year of 'family leave' to look after children or elderly parents (Asthana, 2008). Obviously a small business in Bay Roberts cannot afford year-long family leave, but it can offer flexi-time or the opportunity to work from home. Allowing social network media usage for a limited period during the work day keeps working parents connected to their family. Bonuses linked to individual performance instead of company performance can be a greater incentive when there is an office imbalance in employee effort. Social events, such as going out to lunch on Friday's, and free perks, like a break room with a Wii can build employee relationships and loyalty to a firm. Such measures entail increased spending, but employers will save significantly more through reduced recruitment and selection expenditures.

Even Generation Y staff enjoys challenges; many will put in more effort if the assignment is consequential and could lead to career advancement. It is vital for businesses of all sizes to have employee training programs in place to meet this need. Equally important is sitting down with employees on a regular basis to devise individual career plans within the business. If employers are unwilling to invest in an employee's future, how can they reasonably expect the employee to invest his or her future with them?

Finally, employers must lead by example. Bosses that frequently leave the work site before the employees, or conversely, spend all their time stressed at the office without any personal life will only strengthen any negative views the younger workforce may have.

Simply blaming necessary social safety nets like EI and Workers' Compensation and a disappearing work ethic for problems with employee retention will not solve the problem. However, studying the impact these programs have on businesses and addressing issues that cause workers to prefer to work elsewhere will. The work ethic isn't disappearing; it is merely evolving.

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